

IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

JANUARY, 1955

35¢

WORLD OF THE DRONE

By Robert
Abernathy





There IS a Time when Your Luck Will Change!

"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth..."

—St. Luke 21:25, 26.

When the Bible was written *prophecy* was an outstanding feature of this greatest of all books. Today many scoff at predictions, yet—the Biblical prophecy written 2,000 years ago that the Jews would reestablish a new nation of Israel, *has just come true!* Today we know that there are "cycles" when wars and world problems reach fanatical heights—then changes come.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

JANUARY
1955

VOLUME 6
NUMBER 1

IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

FEBRUARY ISSUE ON SALE
DECEMBER 30th

Stories

WORLD OF THE DRONE

(Complete Novel)by Robert Abernathy..... 6
Today machines serve man—but in Dworn's future they were a lethal necessity!

COMFORT ME, MY ROBOT

(Short story)by Robert Bloch..... 62
In a few centuries a man may solve his marital problems simply—via homicide!

THE DICTATOR

(Short story)by Milton Lesser..... 74
Ellaby had been trained as an assassin; the trouble was, so had his victim! . . .

THE HAND

(Short story)by Jerry Sohl..... 88
Doble was a good hunting dog—so when he met an alien he did the natural thing!

BROWN JOHN'S BODY

(Short story)by Winston Marks100
Erd Neff had his share of money and enemies. Plus a talented—and vicious—pet!

Features

THE EDITORIAL 4
DEATH RAIN61
FERRAN TELEVISION87
PHYSICS IS A MADHOUSE!.....98

FANDORA'S BOX112
SCIENCE FICTION LIBRARY.....121
LETTERS FROM THE READERS.....122
XMAS SUBSCRIPTION OFFER.....130

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The Editorial

RECENTLY one of our eminent figures in the critical world of literature—Clifton Fadiman—voiced a profound observation on what constitutes science fiction. Moderating a new radio program called *Conversation*, on which he had as a guest Aldous Huxley, Mr. Fadiman summed up science fiction by referring to it as wild daydreams of imaginative men. Surprisingly Mr. Huxley took no issue with this definition—which certainly included him!

MR. Fadiman probed his subject endeavoring to discover why science fiction was popular, and in particular why people in technological fields seemed to favor it. He ran the gamut of escapism to reasons of a quasi-religious nature. For a man of his erudite stature it is surprising to us that the obvious reason escaped him. But then, even Aldous Huxley seemed befuddled on the subject.

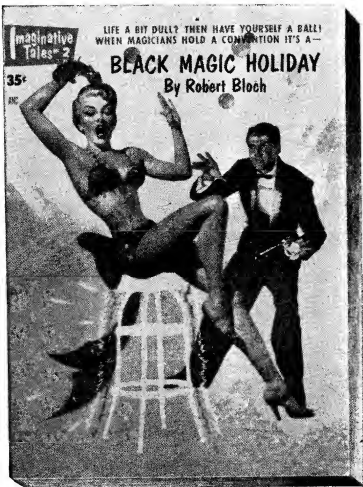
GENTLEMEN, what prompted Columbus to pit his puny fleet against the mighty Atlantic? Fame, fortune, surely, but paramount the adventurer's instinct, the quest for knowledge, achievement, the braving of a vast unknown. Similarly our early settlers who foraged across this continent, breaking a trail, charting a course for other men to follow.

What, we ask, is so wild in the desire to venture into space—the last and greatest frontier man faces—the greatest challenge to the human race.

IT'S as simple as that. Nothing to probe to profound depths for. Space flight — the backbone of science fiction—is the world of tomorrow. Writers and readers of science fiction recognize this and enjoy speculating on man's forthcoming great adventure. Messers Fadiman and Huxley, we're ashamed of you. Even fans of Captain Video could have told you the facts! wll



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Dworn knew that if his machine failed him in battle he would die. For men fought each other viciously, with no bond of brotherhood, in this—

World Of The Drone

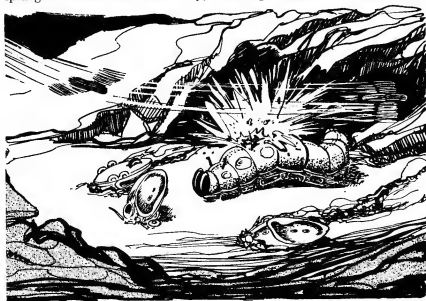
by

Robert Abernathy

THE beetle woke from a dreamless sleep, yawned, stretched cramped limbs and smiled to himself. In the west the sunset's last glow faded. Stars sprang out in the clear desert sky,

dimmed only by the white moon that rose full and brilliant above the eastern horizon.

Methodically, suppressing impatience, he went through every evening's ritual of waking. He



checked his instruments, scanned the mirrors which gave him a broad view of moonlit desert to his left. To the right he could see nothing, for his little armored machine lay half-buried, burrowed deep into the sheltering flank of a great dune; all day long it had escaped the notice of prowling diurnal machines of prey. He listened, too, for any sound of danger which his amplifiers might pick up from near or far.

The motor, idling as it had all day while its master slept, responded to testing with a smooth, almost noiseless surge of power. The instruments were in order; there was plenty of water in the condenser, and though his food supply was low that shouldn't matter—before tonight was done he would be once more among his people.

Only the fuel gauge brought an impatient frown to his face. It was menacingly near the empty mark—which meant he would have to spend time foraging before he could continue his journey. Well . . . no help for it. He opened the throttle.

The beetle's name was Dworn, and he was twenty-one years old. The flesh and blood of him, that is. The rest, the steel-armored shell, the wheels and engine and hydraulic power-system, the electric sensory equipment—all of which was to his mind as much part of

his identity as his own skin, muscles, eyes and ears—was only five years old.

Dworn's face, under his sleep-tousled thatch of blond hair, was boyish. But there were hard lines of decision there, which the last months had left . . . Tonight by the reckoning of his people, he was still a youth; but when tomorrow dawned, the testing of his wander-year would be behind him, and he would be adult, a warrior of the beetle horde.

Sand spilled from the beetle's dull-black carapace as it surged from its hiding-place. It drifted, its motor only a murmur, along the shoulder of the dune. Dworn eyed his offending fuel gauge darkly; he would very much have liked to be on his way at top speed, toward the year's-end rendezvous of the horde under the shadow of the Barrier . .

He began cruising slowly, at random, across the rolling moonlit waste of wind-built dunes, watching for spoor.

He spied, and swerved automatically to avoid, the cunningly concealed pit of a sand devil, strategically placed in a hollow of the ground. Cautiously Dworn circled back for a second look. The conical pit was partly fallen in, unrepaired; the devil was obviously gone.

The burrowing machine would, Dworn knew, have had fuel and

other supplies somewhere in its deep lair, buried beneath the drifted sand where it spent its life breathing through a tube to the surface and waiting for unwary passers-by to skid into its trap. But Dworn regretfully concluded that it would not be worth while digging on the chance that whatever had done away with the devil had not rifled its stores . . . He swung the beetle's nose about and accelerated again.

On the next rise, he paused to inspect the track of a pill-bug; but to his practiced eye it was quickly evident that the trail was too old, blowing sand had already blurred the mark of heels, and the bug probably was many miles away by now.

A mile farther on, luck smiled on him at last. He crossed the fresh and well-marked trail of a caterpillar—deeply indented tread-marks, meandering across the dunes.

HE began following the spoor, still slowly, so as not to lose it or to run upon its maker unawares. A caterpillar was a lumbering monster of which he had no fear, but it was much bigger than a beetle, and could be dangerous when cornered. Dworn had no wish to corner it; the caterpillar itself was not the object of his stalking, but one of its supply caches which according to caterpillar custom it would have

hidden at various places within its range.

The trail led him uphill, into a region cut by washes — dry now, since the rainy season was past—and by ridges that rose like naked vertebrae from the sea of sand that engulfed the valley floor.

Several times Dworn saw places where the caterpillar had halted, backed and filled, shoved piles of earth and rocks together or scraped patches of ground clear with its great shovel. But the beetle knew his prey's habits of old, and he passed by these spots without a second glance, aware that this conspicuous activity was no more than a ruse to deceive predators like himself. If Dworn hadn't known that trick, and many others used by the various non-predatory machine species which manufactured food and fuel by photosynthesis, he would have been unfit to be a beetle—and he would never have lived through the wanderyear which weeded out the unfit according to the beetle people's stern immemorial custom.

At last he came to a stop on a rocky hillside, where the tracks were faint and indistinct. Carefully scanning the ground down-slope, he saw that his instinct had not misled him—the caterpillar had turned aside at this place and had afterward returned

to its original trail, backing and dragging its digging-blade to obliterate the traces of its side excursion.

Dworn grinned, feeling the stirring of the hunter's excitement that never failed to move him, even on such a prosaic foraging expedition as this. He sent the beetle bumping down the slope.

The blurred trail led into the sandy bed of a wash at the foot of the hill, and along that easily-traveled way for a quarter mile. Then the stream made a sharp bend, undercutting a promontory on the left and creating a high bank of earth and soft white rock. Dworn saw that a section of the bank had collapsed and slid into the gully. That was no accident; the mark where a great blade had sheared into the overhang was plain to read, even if it had not been for the scuffed over vestiges of caterpillar tracks round about.

Dworn halted and listened intently, his amplifier turned all the way up. No sound broke the stillness, and the black moonshadows within range of his vision did not stir.

He nosed the beetle carefully up to the heap. He had no equipment for moving those tons of soil and rock, but that was no matter. He twisted a knob on the control panel, a shutter in the

beetle's forward cowling snapped open and a telescoping drill thrust from its housing, chattered briefly and took hold, while the engine's pulse strengthened to take up the load.

Twice Dworn abandoned fruitless borings and tried a different spot. On the third try, at almost full extension the drill-point screeched suddenly on metal and then as suddenly met no more resistance. Dworn switched on the pump, and quickly turned it off again; he swung the overhead hatch open, and—pausing to listen warily once more—clambered out onto the cowl, in the cold night air, to open the sample tap at the base of the drill and sniff the colorless fluid that trickled from it.

It gave off the potent odor of good fuel, and Dworn nodded to himself, not regretting his caution though in this case it had not been needed. But—clever caterpillars had been known to bury canisters of water in their caches, poison for the unsuspecting.

THE pump throbbed again; there was the satisfying gurgle of fuel flowing into almost-empty tanks. Dworn leaned back, seizing the opportunity to relax for a moment in preparation for the strenuous journey still before

him.

But he didn't fail to snap alert when just as the gauge trembled near the full mark, he heard pebbles rattling on the hillside above. Immediately thereupon he became aware of the grind of steel on stone and the rumbling of an imperfectly muffled engine.

In one smooth rapid motion Dworn switched off the pump, and spun the drill control. As the mechanism telescoped back into place, he gunned his engine, and the beetle shot backward and spun round to face the oncoming noise.

A squarish black silhouette loomed high on the slope above the overhanging bank, which rose so steeply that a stone loosened by turning treads bounded with a clang off the beetle's armor in the wash below. The caterpillar halted momentarily, engine grumbling to take in the scene.

Dworn didn't linger to learn its reaction at spying a looter. A snap shot from his turret gun exploded directly in front of the other machine, throwing up a cloud of dust and—he hoped—confusing its crew. And the beetle was fleeing around the bend in the stream bed, keeping close to the high bank.

A score of yards past the turning, intuition of danger made

Dworn swerve sharply. An instant later, the ground blew up almost in his face—the bend had brought him into view, under the guns of the enemy above.

He wrenched the beetle around in a skidding turn and raced back for the bend where the overhang afforded shelter. Another shell and another crashed into places he had just left, and then he was safe—for the moment.

But it was an uncomfortable spot. The caterpillar rumbling wrathfully on the slope above him, couldn't see him as long as he hugged the bank, undercut by the water that flowed here in the rainy season; but, by the same token, he couldn't make a dash for safety without running the gauntlet of a murderous fire in the all-too-narrow way the stream bed offered. In open country, he would not have hesitated to count on his ability to outmaneuver and outshoot the caterpillar. . . but here he was neatly trapped.

And it was nerve-racking to be unable to see what the enemy was about. It seemed to have halted, judging the situation just as he had been doing. Now, though, he heard its engine speed up again, and the grinding of its treads came unmistakably closer. His ears strained to gauge its advance as it came lurching down the slope, till it

sounded only a few feet away and Dworn braced himself to shoot fast and straight if it started coming down over the bank. Then it paused again, and sat idling, hoping no doubt that he would panic and show himself.

He didn't. The caterpillar's engine raced up once more and began to labor under a heavy load. There was an increasing clatter of falling stones. Then Dworn remembered the great digging-blade it carried, and realized what it was going to try.

Ten feet to his right the bank began giving way. Tons of rubble thundered into the gully. Dworn winced and moved away as far as he dared. He heard the caterpillar back and turn, then it snarled with effort once more and another section of the overhang caved in with a grinding roar.

Inside minutes at this rate, it would either have driven him from his refuge or buried him alive. Now it came rumbling forward for the third time; rocks showered from the rim directly above his head, and he saw the bank begin to tremble.

DWORN braced himself. Even as the wall of earth and rock began leaning outward above him, he gave his engine full throttle. The wheels spun for one sicken-

ing instant, then the little machine lunged forward from beneath the fresh landslide and was climbing, bucking and slewing, up the slope of loose soil created by the ones before.

The caterpillar loomed black and enormous on his left hand, so close that it could not have brought its guns to bear even if its crew had expected the beetle to take this daring way out. With its shovel lowered and half-buried, it could not swing round quickly—Dworn had counted on that.

As the beetle's flank cleared the corner of the digging blade with inches to spare, Dworn's gun turret passed in line with the space between the blade and the caterpillar's treads, and he jabbed the firing button. The explosion wreathed the monster's forward half in smoke and dust, and into that cloud it tilted forward, teetered ponderously and then slid headlong to the bottom of the wash as the loosened bank gave way conclusively under its great weight.

Dworn looked back from the hill crest to see it still floundering, treads furiously churning sand, struggling to fight clear of the avalanche it had carried with it. The beetle laughed full-throatedly, without rancor. This hadn't

been the first nor the tightest corner he'd been in during the dangerous course of his wander-year; and in that hard school of life you learned not to worry about danger already past.

At another time, he might have returned to the battle in hope of capturing the additional supplies the caterpillar carried and—still more valuable booty—the chart it would have, showing the location of its other caches. But now he was in a hurry—this refueling foray had cost him a couple of hours, and the moon was already high.

So he slipped quietly away over the ridge and set his course to the east.

Beyond the hilly land, the terrain ironed out into level alkali flats where a vanished lake had been in the long-gone days when the earth was fertile. There he opened the throttle wide. The plain, white in the moonlight, rolled under the racing wheels at ninety and a hundred miles an hour; air whistled over the carapace . . .

Impatience surged up in Dworn once more. Eagerly he pictured his forthcoming reunion with his native horde—and with Yold, his father, chief of the horde.

Countless times in the long wanderyear—in moments when

death loomed nearer than it had in the brush just past, and he despaired of surviving his testing, or in other moments, yet harder to bear, when the immensity of the desert earth seemed about to swallow him up in his loneliness—he had grasped at that vision now soon to be real: he, Dworn, stood before the assembled horde, the year of his proving triumphantly completed, and he received before them all the proud, laconic commendation of the chief, his father.

Hungrily he scanned the horizon ahead, saw with leaping heart that it was no longer flat. Along it a black line rose, and grew ragged as it came nearer, and became an endless line of cliffs, marching straight north and south as far as the eye could see . . . The Barrier!

Dworn recognized familiar landmarks, and altered his direction a little so as to be heading directly for the year's-end rendezvous. He knew, from childhood memories even, the outline of that vast stone rampart as it appeared by moonlight. Every year the Barrier formed the eastern limit of the beetles' annual migration, as naturally as the shore of the sea was its westward terminus. So it had been for a thousand years or more, as far back as the

oldest traditions reached: generation after generation, hunting, foraging, and fighting—from the Barrier to the ocean, from the ocean to the Barrier.

TO right and left the serried cliffs stretched out of sight—the edge of the world, so far as beetles knew. If you examined the contour of its rim, you could see how it corresponded point by point to the irregularities of the hilly land on its hither side. Some time, millennia ago, a great fault in the earth's crust had given way, and the unknown lands of the continental interior had been lifted as if on a platform, five hundred feet above the coastal regions. Or perhaps the coast had sunk. Legend attributed the event to the ancients' wars, when, it was said, some unimaginable weapon had cleft the continent asunder. . .

Dworn perforce slowed his breakneck pace as the ground grew uneven again. He guided his machine with instinctive skill over the ascending slopes and ridges, eyes combing the moonshadows for the first sign of his people.

Then, a couple of miles ahead, he glimpsed lights. His heart bounded up—then sank with a prescient dismay; there was some-

thing wrong—

The fires that winked up there—four, no, five of them, under the very rim just before the cliffs rose sheer—didn't look like campfires. They were unequally spaced, and they flared up and waned oddly by turns, glowing evilly red.

Dworn braked the beetle to a stop on a patch of high ground, and sat straining to discern the meaning of those ominous beacons. To his imagination, rasped raw by expectation and the tension of long travel, they became red eyes of menace, warnings . . . He tried the infrared viewer, but it showed no more than he could see with the naked eye. Only ghosts paraded across the screen, ghosts of the folded slopes that rose to the abrupt wall of the Barrier. Nothing seemed moving there; the whole sweep of broken and tumbled landscape appeared dead and lifeless as the moon.

But yonder burned the fires.

Sternly Dworn reminded himself that this night he was mature, a warrior of the proud beetle race. He thrust his fears resolutely aside; there was nothing to do but find out.

The beetle drifted forward, but cautiously now, at a stalking pace. Dworn took advantage of the lie of the land, continually

seeking cover as he advanced, to shield him from whatever eyes might be watching from the silent slopes above.

Boulders lay ever more thickly strewn as he neared the Barrier cliffs, and he skirted patches of gravel and loose stones that would have crunched loudly under his wheels. Only occasionally, emerging into the open, he glimpsed his objective, but his sense of direction kept him bearing steadily toward the fires.

Fifteen minutes later, the beetle's blunt nose thrusting from under a shelf of rock that would disguise its outline if anything was watching, its motor noiselessly idling, Dworn knew that his premonitions had not been in vain. He looked out upon a scene that chilled his blood.

The burning machines, scattered for two hundred yards along the talus slope where destruction had come upon them or where they had plunged out of control, were beetles. Or they had been. Now they were wrecks, smashed, overturned, fitfully aflame.

There was no sign of an enemy. But here was the havoc which some powerful enemy had wrought, it could not have been long ago.

He strove to find identifying marks on the blackened hulks, but in the uncertain light could make

out at first no more than the female ornaments which had graced two or three of them. Names and faces flashed through Dworn's mind; he could not know yet who had perished here, which faces he would not see again. . .

It hardly occurred to him to speculate that anyone might be left alive on the scene of the debacle. For one thing, the destruction's thoroughness was too evident, and besides, in Dworn's mind, by all his background and his teaching, human and machine were inextricably one; when one perished, so did the other . . .

THERE was a dull explosion, a shower of sparks and a spreading glare as a fuel tank blew up. The flare revealed the pillar of smoke, blood-colored by reflection, that towered into the night above the scene.

And it revealed more. For Dworn saw by that unholy light that one of the nearer beetles—capsized and burned out, its carapace burst raggedly open—it bore the golden scarab emblem which was the chief's alone.

The sight smote Dworn like a physical blow, so that he almost cried out aloud. Somehow it had not even crossed his mind that his father Yold could have been among the slain in whatever dis-

aster had fallen upon the beetles here. . . Others might die; but his father was a pillar of strength that could not fall—the grave iron-willed chief, demanding and rewarding, for his son impartially as for all the people. . .

Dworn's breath choked in his throat and his eyes stung. Fiercely he told himself that a beetle, a chief's son, did not weep.

Not to mourn—to revenge, that was his duty. By the law of his people, the bereaved son must seek out and slay not less than three members of whatever race had done his father to death. Until then, his father's insatiate spirit would roam the deserts without rest. . .

But Dworn did not even know as yet who had done this night's work.

Suddenly, by the new blaze that still continued, he saw movement, a dull sheen of metal moving, and he froze the gesture that had been about to send him forward into the arena of death.

The infrared was useless; by it the flickering firelight was blinding. Dworn bit his lip in anger at his own lack of precaution, and hastily twisted his sound-receptor control to maximum. The crackling of the flames swelled to a hissing roar, but through it he heard the unmistakable creaking

sound of treads. Beyond the smoke moved an indistinct and monstrous shape.

Dworn's jaw muscles set rock-hard and his hand flashed to another control. His turret gun revolved soundlessly, and the crosshairs of the sight danced across the mirrored image of the approaching thing. His finger poised over the firing button, he braced himself to fling his machine into swift evasive action before the enemy's perhaps overwhelming firepower could reply—

The monster lumbered slowly into the light, canted far over and traveling with an odd sidling motion along the steep rubbly slope. Great treads set far out on each side of the squat, ungainly body preserved it against overturning. Its flattened forward turret swiveled nervously from side to side, peering blackly from vision ports steel-shuttered down to squinting slits.

And Dworn relaxed. The red hatred that had blazed up in him subsided into mere disgust; he watched the great machine's wary progress with a familiar, instinctive contempt. It was a scavenger, huge but not very formidable, drawn from afar by the fires which promised loot, salvageable scrap, perhaps even usable parts, fuel or ammunition . . . It could not

possibly have been responsible for the carnage; such cowardly creatures gave a wide berth to the beetle horde.

The monster ground to a halt amid the wreckage. Then its engine bellowed with sudden power and it spun half round, one tread spraying gravel, and backed hastily away up the slope. And Dworn was aware that the noise of creaking treads had redoubled. He cast about, and saw, laboring upward from below, another big machine, closely similar to the first.

Both scavengers came to a stop, facing one another across the fading of the fires, their unmuffled engines grumbling sullenly. Dworn watched them narrowly, expecting the shooting to begin any moment. But the scavengers' way of life was not one that encouraged reckless valor. After a long minute, a hatch-cover was lifted in the first arrival's armored back; a cautious head thrust forth, and shouted hoarsely, words clear to Dworn's amplified hearing:

"Better go back where you came from, brother. We got here first!"

The other scavenger's turret-hatch also swung slightly open. A different voice answered: "Don't talk foolishness, brother. We've got as much right here as you, and anyway we *saw* it first!"

The first voice thickened with

belligerence. "We've got the advantage of the ground on you, brother. Better back up!"

"Oh, go smelt pebbles!" snarled the other. No doubt that was a scathing rejoinder among the scavengers.

DWORN grimaced scornfully and brought his turrent-gun to bear on an outcropping midway between the disputants. Either of them outweighed the little beetle twenty times over—but at this juncture a single unexpected shot would probably send both of them scuttling for cover—

But he halted again on the verge of firing. For he had not stopped listening, and now his trained ears picked out another, an unfamiliar sound from the background of noises.

It was a queer rattle and scurry, mingled with a high-pitched buzz that could only come from a number of small but high-speed motors. It was not a sound the exact like of which Dworn remembered having heard before. He went rigid, staring, as the sound's source came into view.

A column of little machines — lighter even than a beetle, and more elongated—advancing in single file, multiple wheels swerving in the leader's tracks as the column wound nearer along the mountain-

side. As the firelight fell on them they gleamed with the mild sheen of aluminum. Round vision-ports stared glassily, and turbines buzzed feverishly shrill.

With astonishing bravado, the flimsy little vehicles, one behind another, came parading onto the wreck-strewn slope.

And what was more startling still—no two of them were alike. The leader mounted a winch in plain view; behind came another machine fitted with oddly-shaped grappling claws, and next one bearing a mysterious device terminating in front in a sort of flexible trunk. . . . Strangely, too, they didn't seem to carry any armament—no snouting guns, no flame or gas projectors.

Despite that fact or perhaps because of it, something sounded an alarm deep in Dworn's mind.

Their diversity itself was uncanny, that was certain. In all Dworn's experience, machines were the work of races whose traditions of construction, handed down from forgotten antiquity, were as fixed and unvarying as the biological heredity that made one race light-haired, another dark. . .

A hatch-cover clanged shut, and another. The squabbling scavengers had finally noticed the appearance of outside competition. The one upslope raced its engine uncertainly, swung round to face

the buzzing invaders, hesitated.

The newcomers, for their part, seemed oblivious to the scavengers' presence. Their column began dispersing. A grapple-armed machine laid hold on one of the wrecked beetles and, whining with effort, sought to drag it to leveler ground. A second, following, spat a burst of sparks and extended a gleaming arm tipped by the singing blue radiance of a cutting torch.

The first-come scavenger growled throatily and lumbered toward the interlopers, plainly taking heart from their air of harmless stupidity. Behind it, the other scavenger came clattering up the slope to its fellow's aid.

Flame bloomed thunderously from the muzzle of the first one's forward gun. The machine with the torch was flung bodily into the air and went rolling and bouncing down the hill, wheels futilely spinning. The gun roared again, and the exploding shell tore open a flimsy aluminum body from nose to tail. Motors whirled frantically as the pygmies scattered before the charging behemoth. One of them darted witlessly right under the huge treads, and disappeared with a brief screech of crumpling metal.

THE fight was over as quickly as it had begun. The scavenger wheeled, snorting, and fired

one more shot into the dark after its routed opponents . . .

Dworn muttered an imprecation under his breath. No chance of frightening the scavengers off now that their blood was up and their differences forgotten; and a lone beetle could scarcely stand up to two of them in a knock down fight. To rush in now would be suicidal.

He gave up the idea of investigating the scene of disaster more closely, and backed stealthily away, keeping to the cover of the rocks. At a safe distance he began circling round, downslope.

What he could and must do now was to locate what was left of his native horde. It had numbered about fifty when he had departed for his wanderyear; a dozen, perhaps more, had died on the mountain tonight. He must seek out the survivors, and help plan retaliation against whatever enemy had dealt them this terrible blow.

Yet something else nagged at his mind, until he halted to gaze achingly once more toward the glowing embers up there, where the scavengers now clanked to and fro about their business.

Dworn recognized that what bothered him was the puzzle of the unidentified little machines that had turned up on the battlefield only to be sent packing. During his

yearlong solitary struggle to survive, he had developed an extra sense or two—and in the queerly confident behavior of those buzzing strangers he had scented danger, a trap . . .

So it happened that he was still looking on at the moment when the trap was sprung.

A star, it seemed, fell almost vertically from the zenith, falling and expanding with the uncanny silence of flight faster than sound. The scavengers had no time to act. Dworn caught one faint glimpse of a winged shape against the sky, limned by the flashes that stabbed from it as it leveled out of its terrific dive.

One scavenger shuddered with the force of a heavy explosion somewhere within it, and subsided, smoking. The other too staggered under crippling impacts, but ground somehow into motion, spinning and sliding crazily down the gravel slope. Then, as the first attacker's shock-wave made the very earth tremble, a second and a third plunged from the black heights, and as the last one rose screeching from its swoop the whole lower face of the hillside boomed into a holocaust of flame and oily smoke. The fleeing scavenger was gone, enveloped somewhere in an acre of fiery hell.

Dworn, two hundred yards away,

felt a searing breath of heat, and with a great effort controlled the impulse to whirl round and race for opener ground. He sat still, hands cramped sweating on the beetle's controls, while the sky whistled vindictively with the flight of things that circled in search of further targets.

When, after a seeming eon, their screaming died away, he released held breath in a long sigh. He found himself trembling with reaction. Still he didn't stir. He was ransacking his memory for something he should be able to recall but which eluded him—a myth, perhaps, heard as a child beside the campfires of the horde—

The old men would know; Yold would have known. At thought of his father, the grief and fury rose up again in Dworn, and this time he knew the object of his vengeful anger. There was small doubt now in his mind that those flying machines which struck so swiftly and so murderously had been the beetles' attackers.

But he didn't know what they were. He knew, of course, about the machines called hornets, which could fly and strike at fearful speeds like that, outracing sound. But the hornets flew only in daylight, and made no trouble for the nocturnal race of beetles. These—were something else.

And more—between the deadly night-fliers and the harmless-looking aluminum crawlers he had seen, Dworn sensed some connection, some unnatural symbiosis. He had heard vague rumors about such arrangements, but had half-discounted them; any of the peoples whom he knew at first hand would have scorned to enter into alliance with an alien species.

Lastly, he realized bitterly, he didn't even know where the enemy's lair, their base on the ground, might be. . . .

THE moon stood high now. But the Barrier, close at hand now, rose like an immense black wall, folded in shadows, revealing no secrets—walling off the world the beetles knew from the unknown beyond. Involuntarily Dworn shivered. He couldn't be sure—but it seemed to him that the destroyers had come from over the Barrier and had flown back there.

He set his machine in cautious motion again and stole along, making northward and keeping close to the Barrier. It occurred to him that the beetle horde, routed and fleeing, might well have hugged the cliffs for protection against flying foes.

The going here was not easy. The terrain seemed increasingly unfamiliar though he should have

known every foot of it. But—he remembered no such tumbled crags, no such great heaps of stony detritus as blocked his way and forced him into long detours. . . .

Finally he halted to take his bearings, and, looking up, discovered what had happened. The black rampart of the Barrier was notched and broken. Sometime in the past year, since Dworn had left this place to begin his wandering, a quarter-mile-wide section of the upper crags, hollowed and loosened by the slow working of millennial erosion, had fallen and spilled millions of tons of rock crashing and shattering onto the slopes below. Here now water would run when the rains fell, and in ten or twenty thousand years, perhaps, a river-course would have completed the breach.

Dworn wondered fleetingly whether any living thing had been here when the cliffs fell. If so, it was buried now, crumbling bone and corroding metal, under the mountain for all time to come.

He set about skirting the rock-fall, still searching the ground for traces of beetle wheels. But there were very few wheel or tread marks of any description to be seen—and that was strange in itself.

Impulsively he halted again and listened, his amplifier turned

up. He should have heard faroff engine-mutterings, occasional explosions from the desert to the west, where normally the predatory machines and their victims prowled and fought all night long over the sandy tracts and the desolate ridges. . . . But there was nothing. A silence, vast and unnatural, lay upon the wastes in the shadow of the high plateau.

He looked up again at the fallen rampart of the Barrier. The great landship had opened, as it were, a gateway to the unknown lands in the east—a gateway for what?

There was a strangeness here since last year, and the strangeness crept chillingly into Dworn's blood, made the mountain air seem thin and cold.

As he started again, he noticed yet another curious thing. He was crossing a sandy natural terrace, and the soft soil here was traversed by a row of indented marks that marched in a straight line across the open space. They were scuffed depressions, such as a ricocheting projectile might have made—but oddly regular in shape and spacing, almost, he thought fancifully, like giant footprints, ten feet apart. . . .

Dworn was growing numbed to riddles. He shrugged impatiently and pressed the accelerator again.

He would push on northward

for a few more miles, he determined, and if he still found no sign of his people, he would circle back to the south. . .

The moonlight shadow of the huge tilted boulder ahead was inky. But Dorn was keeping to the shadows by preference, remembering the death from above; so he cut close around the overhanging rock.

Too late to swerve, then, he saw the gleam of something stretched across his path. A metallic glint of deceptively slender strands which, as the beetle rolled headlong into them, snapped taut without breaking, sprang back and flipped the beetle clean over to fetch up against the rock with an ear-shattering bang.

Half-stunned by the suddenness of it and the violence with which he had been flung about, Dworn blurrily saw other cables settling from overhead, coiling almost like living things around his overturned machine. Then he glimpsed something else; stalking monstrously down from the unscalable crag above, its armor glimmering in the moonlight, a machine such as he had never imagined—a machine without wheels or treads, a nightmare moving on jointed steel legs that flexed and found holds for clawed steel feet with the smooth precision of well-oiled pistons. A

machine that walked.

Capsized, its vulnerable underside exposed, the beetle was all but helpless. One hope remained. With wooden fingers Dworn groped for the emergency button, found it—

The propellant-charge went off beneath him with a deafening roar. The beetle was hurled upward and sidewise, in an arc that should have brought it down on its wheels again—but the ensnaring cables tightened and held, and Dworn's head slammed against something inside the cabin. The world burst apart into a shower of lights and darkness. . . .

DWORN came awake to a pounding head and blurred light in his eyes. He moved, and sensed that he was bound.

His vision cleared. He saw that he was in a closed, half-darkened chamber—and that discovery alone made him shudder, he who as a free beetle had spent his whole life under desert skies. His feet rested on a floor of hard-packed sand, and his back, behind which his wrists were lashed together was propped uncomfortably against a wall ribbed with metal girders. The room was circular and its walls converged upward, into tangled shadows overhead; the chamber was roughly bottle-shaped.

To one side a door stood ajar,

and it was thence that the light streamed, but from where he was Dworn couldn't see into the space beyond.

He tried hard to collect his thoughts. When had everything stopped making sense? When he had first glimpsed the fires that were burning beetles on the mountainside, or . . .

The converging lines of the wall-girders led his eyes upward. The shadows overhead resolved themselves as he studied them, and Dworn's heart pounded as he commenced to understand what manner of place he was in. The roof of the bottle-shaped chamber—he was sure it must be underground—was no roof, but was the underside of a great machine complex with gear-housings and levers connected with the six powerful metal legs radiating from it, their cleated feet resting on a shelf that encircled the bottle-neck. It squatted there, motionless above him, sealing the entrance to its burrow. . .

Trapped. For some reason he couldn't guess at, he had been taken alive—his human body, at least; he didn't know what had become of the rest of him, the machine that was part and parcel of him too.

The light suddenly brightened. The door at one side was swinging open.

Dworn blinked at the glare from the lighted room beyond. Against it a figure stood in silhouette, and he saw that it was a woman.

She was slender, not very tall, and her hair was jet-black, a striking frame for a startlingly pale face. Here beneath the earth she must not get much sun. . . In that white face her lips were shockingly red, the color of fresh blood. And the nails of her slim white fingers were crimson claws. After a moment, he realized that both must be painted—a strange thing to him, for there was no such practice among beetle women.

She was clad in a coverall suit of much the same design as the green garment Dworn wore according to beetle custom. But her garb was shiny black, and in front, between the swelling mounds of her breasts, was an emblem he did not understand; the shape of an hour-glass, in vermilion red.

She stood gazing at him, smiling a little with a curve of scarlet lips that revealed white, sharp-looking teeth. Dworn groped for his voice; but she spoke first.

"Patience, beetle," she said. "I'll attend to you in a moment."

The words had the accent of a strange speech, but they were intelligible. Dworn stared uncomprehendingly at her, mumbled, "Who—*what* are you?"

She moved nearer and stood smiling down at him. "Why, beetle, don't you know? . . . I'm the spider who caught you."

"*Spi-der?*" Dworn fumbled with the unfamiliar word. "I don't—"

Her eyes too were black, very black and intense. She said slowly, "You don't know about spiders, beetle? Strange. It must be that till now there were none of our kind on this side of the Rim."

DWORN'S aching head was not serving him well, but a part of his intelligence functioned to grapple with the implication of her words. "The Rim"—that must mean the Barrier, as seen from its eastern side. Then she, and others like her, must have come from beyond the Barrier. A walking machine could descend by the broken path of the landslide.

But "spider"—the word rang some bell deep in his mind, some recollection of childhood's fairy-tale bogeys perhaps, but he still hadn't succeeded in grasping the memory.

He growled, "I don't know—but if you'd untie my hands, I'd show you what a beetle is."

She eyed him thoughtfully. Then she smiled, showing the sharp little white teeth again. "Presently I'll free you. When it's quite safe. As soon as—" Her hand

dipped to a small black case secured to her belt, and came up with a diminutive gleaming object—a slender needle thrusting from a liquid-filled plastic cylinder fitted with a plunger. "Do you know what *this* is, beetle?"

Dworn glowered silently.

"When I've injected this fluid into your veins, you will have no will of your own left. You'll do what I say, and only what I say—for the rest of your life, beetle!"

Dworn's eyes clung in unwilling fascination to the glittering needle. He said through stiff lips, "Now I remember. Your kind is a legend among my people. The evil women who have no men. . . . who kill their male children at birth, and trap their mates from among the other races, and kill them, too, when they no longer want them. . . . *Spider!*"

His gaze collided squarely with hers, and she needed no skill to read the loathing in it, rendered more violent by her beauty that he could not help but see.

Her eyes dropped first. She clutched the needle and muttered fiercely to herself, "But when you've had the injection, it won't matter. I'll say, 'Love me!' and you'll love me, and 'Die!' and you'll die . . ."

Dworn stared burningly at the slim figure in black with the scar-

let hourglass on her bosom. He was alert again, and his mind was racing. To all appearances he was lost—but something in the spider girl's manner gave him an unreasonable hope.

He said abruptly, "So. Why didn't you use your poison while I was stunned? That would have been easy."

She looked away. "You ask foolish questions, beetle. Naturally, I had to prepare myself according to our customs. I had to paint my face and make myself beautiful . . ."

He said inspiredly, "You *are* beautiful."

Her reaction was surprising. She stood gazing raptly at him, lips slightly parted the hypodermic forgotten in her hand. Dworn sensed that had he been unbound, he would have had no trouble overpowering her.

She whispered, "*It's true, then!*"

And he realized forcibly how young she was—the painted lips made her look much older, and the shadows—which he now saw were also painted on—beneath her eyes. Only a girl, and if she had been one of his own people he would have looked at her twice and more than twice. . .

But above their heads the great spider-machine's underparts gleamed dully, straddling the sunken

den. And the spell lasted only a moment.

The girl straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath. "Why am I talking to a beetle? It's time—"

THERE was a clang of metal from somewhere in the room beyond. The girl's face reflected sudden fright, beneath its painted mask. She spun round and took two steps toward the inner door, but even as she did so, the door swung wide, and dark figures crowded through it.

The girl cried, with terror and anger in her voice, "What do you mean, coming into my Nest like this? You have no right—"

The interlopers were three in number, and all of them were women, wearing black garments like the girl's, with the red spider symbol on the breast. The one in the lead was elderly, her hair wisped with gray, and her face was lined by years and passions; her eyes were flinty, her mouth thin and cruel. The other two were younger; one was a strapping blonde wench taller than Dworn, who moved with a powerful and formidable grace; the other was short, soft-looking, with a child's pouting mouth and a queer, mad glint in her dark eyes.

The older woman said, "No

right? You've had your own Nest for all of three months now, dear Qanya, and already you tell your Mother that she has no right to enter?"

The girl quailed. She retreated step by step until her back was against the wall beside Dworn, and met the old woman's eyes with a look half fright, half defiance.

"But, of course, you have your reasons," the Spider Mother went on bitingly. Her hard eyes stabbed at the bound and helpless Dworn. "Somewhere you managed to catch this, and bring him in without letting anyone know, and paint your face and prepare the needle . . . You chose to forget that in times like these there are others of the Family whose claim to a mate has priority over yours!"

"*That's* true, Mother!" said the tall blonde energetically. The plump girl licked her full lips and said nothing.

"Quiet, Purri!" snapped the Spider Mother. Her eyes raked the girl Qanya again. "Well, and what do you have to say for yourself?"

Qanya's black eyes flashed. "I caught him myself," she blazed. "You've no right—"

"No right, no right," mocked the old woman. "Why, I believe that, if you'd dared, you'd have blocked up the connecting tunnel so we couldn't walk in on you. Who has

rights is for *me* to decide—and for me to decide whether you're whipped and sent back to the young girls' dormitory. Until I've made up my mind—" She turned and frowned thoughtfully at her two companions, jabbed a finger at the tall one. "You, Purri, stay here and see that nothing happens to the catch, and make sure our little Qanya doesn't misbehave. I'm going to my Nest and check over the Family ledger, to settle the question of who's first in line for a mate. We've got to be strict, now that the cursed night-fliers are everywhere and it's been so long since we trapped a presentable male." She eyed Dworn once more, and smiled thinly. "He's a fine youth. Who knows? I might even take him for myself."

Dworn had no stomach for the compliment. Secretly, he was twisting his bound hands behind him, trying to loosen the knots. Those knots had been none too skillfully tied, and given time. . But he had to desist as the tall Purri strode near and stood over him. She cast a glance after the retreating backs of the Spider Mother and her other proteges, then devoted all her attention to Dworn, surveying him in critical silence and with a business-like eye for detail.

Qanya huddled against the

wall; her dark eyes were enormous, and tears had streaked the make-up on her cheeks.

Purri nodded satisfiedly. "He'll do," she said matter-of-factly to Qanya. "The Mother should give him to me. It's a choice between me and Marza, really—" She jerked her head toward the door through which the dark, pouting girl had gone— "But Marza doesn't really appreciate a mate. All she cares about is seeing how long she can take to make them die."

Qanya stared hotly at her. She said in a stifled voice, "You're a beast, and Marza is a beast, and —"

"Careful!" said Purri lazily. "If you say anything against the Mother, I'll have to report you." Arms akimbo, she looked scornfully down at the younger girl's tearful face.

DWORN had been right about the knots Qanya had tied. They were slipping. He wrestled in silence, hoping for a little more time. . . Then he was sickeningly aware that Qanya was looking toward him, had seen what he was doing. For an instant he froze.

Qanya said hurriedly, "Anyway, you're a beast, Purri. A greedy one. You've had two mates already—why didn't you make them last? And I've not even had one."

"When you're older," said Purri loftily, her back still turned to the struggling beetle, "you'll understand more. But you ought to know from your schooling that there are some races that mate for life—and among them, the males dominate the female. We spiders are above such degrading practices."

Qanya's eyes flicked momentarily to Dworn, who was wrenching at the final knot. "Yes, yes, I know," she said. "But I still say it isn't fair—"

Dworn came catlike to his feet, ignoring the pain of cramped limbs. The cord with which he had been bound was looped in his hands. With a single stride he was upon the unwarned Purri; one hand clamped over her mouth, cutting off outcry, and the other hand whipped the cord tight around her. She fought with the strength of a man, but futilely. Dworn ripped a length of fabric from her clothing and improvised a gag; when he was done, the spider woman could do no more than kick and gurgle a little.

During the brief struggle, Qanya had watched without making a sound, hands pressed against the girdered wall at her back. As Dworn faced her now, breathing hard, he saw fear written large in her face.

She whispered, "Beetle, you won't hurt me?"

Dworn hesitated briefly. There was no doubt she had helped him—if only out of jealousy of the others. But at the same time she was a spider, a natural enemy. And time was desperately vital. In a flash of inspiration, he saw that there was one way to make sure of his escape.

"If you're quiet," he promised, "I won't hurt you. Not much, anyway." Then his arm was about her, pinioning her, while his free hand snaked to her waist and plucked the hypodermic from its case. For a moment she struggled and even tried to bite him, as she saw what he was about to do. Then, clumsily but effectively, he had stabbed the needle into her upper arm and pressed the plunger home.

He felt her stiffen and then relax, shivering, as the drug coursed through her blood. He released her and stepped back, watching her warily.

"How do you like your own medicine, spider?" he demanded harshly.

The girl stood motionless. Her black eyes, fixed on him, seemed to dull as if with sleep.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes," she said tonelessly.

"Do you obey me if I give you orders?"

"Yes."

Dworn grinned exultantly. It had worked—But there was no time to lose. The Spider Mother might return any moment.

"Where is my machine?"

She answered without expression, "I left it where it was. I didn't want it, I was only seeking a mate."

Dworn sighed with heartfelt relief. He looked upward, toward the spider-machine overhead: "All right. I command you to take me back to the place where you left my beetle."

Qanya turned silently toward a slender steel ladder that rose to the belly of the crouching metal monster. Dworn followed her, his nerves still strung close to the snapping point, but with hope leaping in him. . . On the floor, the trussed-up Purri stared up with round eyes and made smothered noises.

THEY clambered into the spider through a port in its underside, past the engines and the great drums of steel cable which served to snare the spider's prey. The space within was cramped, barely big enough to hold two, and its instruments and controls were bewilderingly strange to Dworn. The tangle of switches and levers that must govern the mechanical legs

made no sense at all to him, and he felt a moment of near-panic: if the hypnotic injection's magic should fail, he would be quite helpless here.

Braving it out, he snapped, "Make it go!"

Obediently Qanya touched this and that control. The spider's engine throbbed with power, and its legs straightened, lifting it so quickly as to cause a sinking sensation in the stomach. From overhead came a creaking, and a band of light appeared and widened, grew dazzling as a circular trapdoor opened on daylight.

Dworn caught his breath. He hadn't reckoned with its being daytime; evidently he had been unconscious longer than he had supposed. But he couldn't worry about that.

"Go on!" he rasped. "Outside!"

The machine clambered stiffly out of its burrow; sand crunched under its steel feet. Blinking at the sun, Dworn saw that the trap opened on a stretch of boulder-strewn wasteland; it must not be far from the foot of the great slide. The trapdoor was coated with sand to make it appear only a half-buried rock, and in the near distance were other, closely similar outcroppings that were very likely the entrances to other spiders' burrows.

"Get us away from here! Quick!" ordered Dworn shakily.

Still wordlessly, her face smooth and mask-like, the girl set the walking machine in motion. It moved with a queer rolling gait which made Dworn dizzy, though it stilted over the irregularities of the ground with scarcely a jar. Dworn felt nakedly exposed, riding high above the ground in broad daylight, but he gritted his teeth and tried not to think of the probability of attack by some day-faring marauder. He supposed the spider girl, accustomed likewise to a nocturnal life, would have felt the same fear of the light, if she hadn't been hypnotized.

Under the drug's influence she apparently couldn't speak unless spoken to. However, there were questions he wanted to ask her.

First — "What do you know about the attack on the beetles last night?"

"I know there was a battle," said Qanya flatly, without looking up from the controls. "I didn't see it, but the Mother and some others were prowling at the time, and saw. It was the flying things, which have given us too so much trouble."

That, if true—and he judged that it *must* be true—confirmed his prior suspicion, and killed another suspicion he had entertained for a

little while—that the spiders themselves might have been the ambushers. He demanded, "What do you know about those night-fliers?"

"Very little. We do not know just what they are or where they came from. They began appearing hereabouts only four months ago, which was three months after the Rim collapsed and the Mother decided that we should descend and try the hunting on this side. Since then they've grown more and more numerous. They fly by day as well as by night, and attack everything that moves. They've taken several of our Family, and I think they've made heavy depredations on the peoples that inhabit this region. We spiders would have abandoned the location before now, but we feared to be caught migrating in the open. . . ."

DWORN gazed apprehensively out at the glaring desert that was rolling past the spider wind-ows. The news that the aerial killers also operated by day was most unwelcome. But as yet there was no sign of an enemy.

He said, "The little ground machines—unarmored, made of aluminum. They're allied in some way to the flying ones, aren't they?"

"We think so. Wherever the fly-

ing machines have made a kill, the crawlers appear before long to carry away the spoils. And if they're attacked—the fliers come swooping down within minutes to defend or avenge them. So most of the other inhabitants have learned to leave the crawlers alone; it's extremely dangerous to meddle with them."

Dworn could confirm that fact from his own observation.

Evidently the spider folk, even though they came from beyond the Barrier as the mysterious others apparently had too, knew little more than he himself had already discovered. But—there was one more question.

"Do you know," he asked tensely, "where these strangers' home base is? Where do they fly from?"

The girl looked doubtful. "We're sure only that it's somewhere beyond the Rim, where we used to live."

That much, too, he had guessed. Dworn subsided into glum silence, as Qanya impassively guided the machine on its way, covering distance at a surprising speed.

Then, even by the unaccustomed daylight, Dworn recognized first one landmark and then another, and knew they were approaching the spot where he had been trapped last night. A weird return, riding as master in the monstrous ma-

chine that had snared him!

As the great tilted rock hove in view, Dworn strained for the first glimpse of his abandoned vehicle. When he saw it, lying still overturned in the shadow of the boulder, he sighed in relief. Its door was ajar, where Qanya must have dragged him stunned from the machine last night . . . but it appeared unscathed. The fear at the back of his mind, that scavengers might have happened on it—in which case they would have had it dismantled and carried away by now—was happily unrealized. For that he perhaps had partly to thank the enemy against whom he had sworn vengeance, the flying fiends who had decimated and terrorized the peoples native to this land. . . .

"All right," he ordered. "Stop here!"

The walking machine crunched to a halt, standing almost over the beetle. Dworn looked at the spider girl, then, in irresolution.

In the pitiless daylight she was still piquantly beautiful, though her pale face was still smudged with the remnants of her ceremonial make-up and her eyes were veiled, withdrawn. Yes, she was even desirable. . . . Dworn put that thought determinedly out of his head. After all, she was an alien and an enemy; she had sought to

make a doomed slave of him.

But now that her usefulness to him was over, he didn't know just what to do about her. The sensible thing would be, of course, simply to kill her. Somehow he felt that he couldn't do that. It was one thing to kill in the impersonal fury of machine combat, a different matter when the victim was helpless within your reach . . . And he remembered that she *had* helped him escape.

He could command her to return to her people, to the tender mercies of the Spider Mother—who would know by now of Qanya's part in Dworn's disappearance. Damn it, that would probably be worse than killing her in cold blood! He was wasting time. Angry at himself for his unbeetlelike softness, Dworn postponed deciding what to do with her till he should have inspected his machine and made sure it was in shape to travel.

"Come along," he told the girl gruffly. "Outside."

Once more she obeyed unprotesting. The two clambered out of the belly of the standing spider—Qanya staring before her with sleepwalking fixity, Dworn nervously scanning sky and horizon for hostile machines. The sunlit waste was terrifyingly immense bright, and empty. With a physical ache of yearning he longed for

the cramped security of his own machine's cabin.

He brushed past the girl and ran toward the upside-down beetle—he could easily right it with a spare emergency cartridge, and then he would be on his way in a normal world again—

He stopped short with one hand on the beetle's dull-black steel flank. The world seemed to rock around him.

THE girl watched him without expression as his face went slack with horror, as he completed his arrested movement and dived into the cabin to confirm the dreadful discovery that first touch had disclosed to him.

When Dworn climbed out he was white and shaking. He took a few steps away from the beetle and sank weakly down on the sunarmed sand.

"What's the matter?" asked Qanya.

He turned and looked dully at her. He had completely forgotten that she was there.

He said listlessly, "I'm *dead*."

"Of course you're dead." Her brows puckered faintly as she gazed at him. "Naturally, I drained your fuel tanks last night—"

Dworn surged to his feet and took one step toward her, fists knotted, blown by a gust of fury.

She stared levelly back at him, unflinching—and he halted, shoulders drooping. "Ah, what's the use?"

He should have foreseen this—not that it would have done any good if he had. The beetle's fuel supply had been drunk up by the spider now towering over them; and the beetle's engine, even idling at minimum consumption, had used up what little remained in the system, and had stopped. And it was as if Dworn's own lifeblood had been drained and his own heart had stopped beating.

Qanya was still watching him blankly. She said, "Can't you start it again?"

Dworn was jolted by the realization that she genuinely didn't understand that he *was* dead—that there was no way of restarting an engine once stopped. Until now he had supposed that all races were the same in that respect; but evidently spiders were different. In fact, now he remembered that, when they had entered the spider-vehicle, the girl had pushed a button that apparently started the engine. Spiders, then, died and came to life again every day—a startling notion.

But the beetles— Among the thoughts that tumbled disjointedly through Dworn's head in this awful moment was a clear vision of the night, five years ago, when his

machine-existence had begun: when, in the horde's encampment by the sea a thousand miles from here, the beetle's last seam had been welded, and its engine set going with the appropriate ritual of birth. . . . The sixteen-year-old boy's heart had beaten high and proudly, in tune with the heart of steel and fire that had begun to throb at that moment. And the life expectancy of the two was measured with the same measure, the life of flesh and that of metal indissolubly entwined. . . .

He mumbled dazedly, "I'm dead, do you hear? Dead!"

There was a sudden howling in the sky. Flashing overhead, as the two stood momentarily petrified, went a shrieking flight of half a dozen winged shapes—stubby vanes slanting back from vicious noses, they hurtled low over the desert and vanished swiftly into the distance, dust-devils dancing across the ground in the whirling wind of their passage.

Dworn stared after them, and his eyes narrowed. A new and desperate resolve had begun shaping itself in his mind.

Of the things he had meant to do in life, it was no use thinking any more of rejoining his people. He was dead to them, for sure—not even a beetle any more, but only what was left of one, a ghost

. . . . But a holy duty, stronger than death, remained to him; his father was still unrevenged.

What he could do against a foe so powerful as those who had just passed over, he had no idea—but perhaps a ghost could accomplish what a living man might well deem impossible.

He motioned Qanya peremptorily toward the waiting spider-machine. "Come on. We're taking your machine, and we're going to find *them*!"

For a moment she seemed to hesitate. . . . then she obeyed. If her face was paler than usual, Dworn failed to notice it.

THE spider-vehicle lurched and swayed, even its marvelous system of shock-absorbers protesting as it climbed steeply, straddling upward from rock to rock.

Dworn clutched at handholds inside the pitching cabin and tried to combat the sympathetic lurching of his stomach. Qanya huddled tensely over the controls, slim hands flashing nimbly to and fro as with incredible deftness she guided the laboring machine.

Dworn risked a glimpse from the turret-windows, then shut his eyes with a rush of giddiness. They were climbing now up the steepest part of the great slide, where the mountainside had collapsed in a chaos

of splintered rock and tumbled crags that would have been utterly impassible for any wheeled vehicle. Below them, the sloping valley floor they had left appeared from this height entirely flat and sickeningly far away. And still the cliff-heads frowning above them seemed terribly remote.

"How. . . far?" gasped Dworn.

"It can't be very far now to the top," said Qanya, without glancing up from her absorbed concentration. Both their lives were in her hands; a slip, a misstep, and they might fall hundreds of feet among the jagged rocks to their death.

For seconds at a time, the walking machine poised motionless, one or more of its clawed limbs groping for footholds. As it clambered painfully upward, it was hopelessly exposed to attack if it should be sighted from the air.

Dworn, the beetle told himself savagely, you are not only a ghost, you are an insane ghost. Only a madman would have undertaken such a journey.

The cabin heeled wildly as the machine grappled a ledge and, its engine panting at full throttle, levered itself upward a few more feet.

He had commanded the spider girl to find the route by which her people had descended. But twice already they had missed the

way and had arrived at dead ends beyond which it was impossible to climb higher; twice they had been forced to descend and search for an easier path. It had been scarcely noon when they started; now the sun was already sinking low.

Dworn could not even be sure that he would find his sworn enemies beyond the Barrier. But the duty of vengeance was all he had left to live for, since what was to have been his triumphal return had ended in bereavement and catastrophe.

And a dead man, thought Dworn bleakly, needs something to live for, even more than other people do.

The world came level again, for the moment. The machine sidled precariously along a narrow ledge girdling an unscalable wall of rock, as Qanya sought a spot to resume the ascent. Dworn winced at the thought that the way might be blocked again. But, no—fifty yards further on, the wall was breached, and toppled boulders formed a perilous but not impossible stairway.

Just as Qanya grasped the levers which would set the spider scrambling upward once more, there was a sound—one grown hatefully familiar to Dworn since the night before, the feverish buzzing of a number of light high-speed engines.

He opened his mouth to hiss a warning, but Qanya too had heard. Instantly she guided the spider-machine as close as possible to the cliff, where the hollowed rock afforded some shelter, and twirled a knob that made it sink down, legs folding compactly.

They waited scarcely breathing. A couple of times before they had huddled like this, while flights of the winged enemies whistled over. . . but the wingless ones? It seemed impossible that they should be up here, where surely nothing that ran on wheels could travel. . .

THE head of a column of the aluminum crawlers came into view, whirring along the ledge with a confident air of knowing where they were going. One by one, the little machines rolled past within a few feet of the crouching spider, hastening on with an uncanny pre-occupation.

Dworn saw that, like those he had seen earlier, they were of diverse kinds; and several of them, fitted with claws and racks for transporting booty, were heavily laden now with metal plates and girders carved from some larger machine, a roll of caterpillar tread, a slightly bent axle . . . The last pygmy in line, whose afterbody was a bloated tank, gurgled as it jolted by, and trailed an aroma of

looted fuel.

A few yards beyond the staring watchers, each of the little plunderers pivoted sharply in its turn and without even slackening speed vanished straight into the cliff-face. Dworn and Qanya looked incredulously at one another.

"A tunnel!" Dworn grunted in realization.

That explained one mystery, at least—how, if the winged and wingless strangers' home base was somewhere above the cliffs, the wheeled machines contrived to forage at the foot of the Barrier. They must have one or more inclined tunnels, bored through solid rock for a distance that staggered Dworn's imagination. Emerging at this level, they had found or constructed a passable road the rest of the way to the valley floor. . . . Now he noticed that the ledge to which the spider had so laboriously climbed showed signs of being an often-used trail, and the cliffs it skirted exhibited in places the raw marks of recent blasting.

"Remember this spot", he told Qanya. "If we should return this same way—there's evidently an easier path down."

She said nothing. Dworn wondered wryly if, in her drug beclouded mind, she was aware of how unlikely it was that either of them

would be returning from beyond the Barrier.

A mad enterprise indeed—a ghost and a zombie, going to seek out a foe whose numbers and whose might grew ever more apparent. The tunnel opening here was clear evidence of engineering resources and skill far beyond that of any of the machine races Dworn knew.

Its discovery was no help to them, since it was far too small to admit the spider.

"Go on!" Dworn ordered doggedly. "At least we know now that *their* dwelling can't be far!"

Qanya glanced briefly sidelong at him, then moved the levers, and the spider rocked upright once more and began to climb.

THE sun was low, and the shadows of rocks and dunes in the valley behind them were pointing long blue fingers eastward, when the machine staggered up the last precipitous ascent and stood on level ground at the summit.

Dworn took a deep breath and looked ahead, looked for the first time in his life upon the unknown land beyond the Barrier.

At first glance, it differed little from any of the desert country where he had lived all his life. The ground shelved gradually away

from the rocky rim on which they stood; far off, against the darkening eastern sky, blue mountains rose murkily, but between here and the ranges lay a vast shallow depression, an arid sink floored with wind-rippled sand. Perhaps it had been a lake-bed once, before natural or unnatural cataclysms, and the millennial drying-up of all this country, had emptied it of water. Or perhaps—as its circular form suggested—it was one of those other, mysterious depressions which were scattered irregularly across the face of the earth where no lakes had ever been; those, legend said, were scars left by the ancients' wars.

The rich light of the declining sun fell at a shallow angle into the miles-wide bowl and brought out with startling clarity the maze of wheel-tracks, crossing and criss-crossing, which covered its sandy expanse and testified to a fever of recent machine activity there. The light gleamed, too, here and there, upon scurrying metallic shapes, that raced by ones and twos or in trickling columns to and from the center of the bowl, where —

Dworn strained his eyes and his capacity for belief in an effort to make sense of the structures there, miles away. He was not very successful, for the scene was, too un-

like anything he had ever looked on before.

There were certain races which built stationary dwellings— Dworn knew of the scale-makers who lived, in colonies sometimes of considerable size, beneath individual armored, anchored domes sunk into the face of some impregnable rock; he knew of the sand devils with their pits, and now he had seen also how the spider people nested. But the huge buildings that loomed yonder, lowering and windowless, and the winged things clustering thick on the ground about them, were such as he had never seen in his nomadic life.

Atop a slender tower that spired above the squat structures he could make out something which turned and turned, something like a broad net of lacy wires, revolving steadily from east to west, from north to south. Strange, too, the smooth-surfaced ways that radiated outward in four directions, like an immense cross, broad paved roads that came to abrupt dead ends a mile or more from the central buildings After a moment, though, he guessed that those were runways for the aircraft which flew from this place.

The unknown builders were obviously a mighty people, a people who had perfected their peculiar form of organization on a gigantic

scale. And a people who acted and thought strangely; for their behavior, as Dworn had observed it, suggested a chilly-blooded and fanatic discipline, a regimentation which he found monstrous and repellent.

Dworn turned questioning eyes on Qanya.

"I Don't know what they are," she answered his unspoken query in a voice that faltered. "I remember this valley. But a few months ago it was uninhabited. All this has been built since then."

DWORN hesitated. He was seeing very clearly now just how hopeless this mad expedition was. Nevertheless, he had sworn vengeance, and he could at least perish with honor.

But— Seeing the fear in Qanya's face, it came to him sharply that, after all, she had no part in his blood feud. She had served him well by bringing him this far. The vague plans he had had, of using the spider-machine for an attack on the enemy, stood revealed as rankest folly. Big and powerful as the spider was by ordinary standards, against such as those it could accomplish little more than a man with his bare hands.

Which was what Dworn would be— He stifled further reflection, said crisply: "You can go now.

I'll remain here; I have a duty to perform. But you can return—go make your peace with your people, or whatever you like."

Qanya's black eyes met his squarely. "I won't," she said.

"Now see here—" Dworn began, and broke off, thunderstruck.

"B-but," he gulped, "you *can't* disobey me. The drug, the spider poison—"

"Doesn't work on a born spider. I must have neglected to mention that, naturally, *we're* all immunized against it." She smiled with a flash of those sharp white teeth.

"Then—then—" Dworn stumbled, feeling his preconceptions tossed helter-skelter. "Then you must have come with me—of your own free will!"

"At first," murmured Qanya, "I knew you'd never trust me unless I pretended . . . and I was curious, too, to see how it was to be the one that obeyed. And then . . . well, you'd have known, if you'd ever seen how the drug really works. You should have realized, anyway, when I laughed at you. . . But you do so love to be masterful don't you?"

For a moment, Dworn's chief emotion was one of quick rage at the revelation of how thoroughly she'd deceived him. Then the anger subsided and left him feeling merely foolish, as he saw that

she'd merely left him deceive himself. And, finally—as it came home to him that this girl had followed him of her own choice into exile and great danger—a new and quite unaccustomed feeling flooded in on him, a queer sense of humility.

"I'm sorry," he said confusedly. "I didn't—I don't—understand."

She breathed in a barely audible voice, "You said I was beautiful . . . And *you* hadn't the drug."

From far away, from around the vast, mysterious buildings, came mournful hooting sounds, a sighing and a sobbing as of some mythical monster in torment.

Dworn was rudely recalled to realization of where they were—and of the fact that, as the spider-machine stood poised here on the cliff-edge, it would be starkly visible from over there, seen against the setting sun.

He gave up trying to unsnarl the tangle of his own feelings. He said hurriedly, "But you should go back. There's no time—I *have* to go on. But there's no reason you should die."

Qanya's face was drawn and determined. "No," she said flatly.

"I don't know what you're talking about. But I won't leave you now . . ."

The distant sighing rose to a whining roar.

"Quick!" cried Dworn in des-

peration. "Find cover. I think we've been seen!"

THE girl reached for the controls and the spider's engine raced up. But it was already late. Off yonder, along that one of the radiating runways that stretched toward them, something was moving, racing swiftly and more swiftly outward with its long shadow following it.

All at once the moving thing left its shadow behind, and Dworn recognized it for an aircraft taking off.

Then he had to snatch for a handhold as the spider-machine lunged into a dead run. At full speed on the level ground, it could make good time; the ground outside skimmed past at fifty or sixty miles an hour.

Qanya had spied some rocky outcroppings, which might furnish a modicum of shelter, about a mile away and some distance from the brink of the cliffs, and she was heading for them. But the terrain nearer at hand was implacably flat—and the enemy was airborne, a vicious winged shape growing at terrifying speed. Its whistling roar swelled and grew deafening.

Qanya shouted something inaudible and pointed. Dworn understood, and, holding on for dear life in the pitching cabin, clawed his

way within reach of the fire-controls. Wrestling with the unfamiliar mechanism, he fought to train the spider's guns on the hurtling attacker.

Puffs of smoke bloomed high in air—but any hit on such a fast-moving target, from so unstable a platform, would have been a miracle. The enemy screeched overhead, and an instant later flame and thunder erupted all around the running spider. The machine stumbled and for a moment seemed going down, but it righted itself and staggered on.

Dworn shook his ringing head and saw the flier banking steeply half a mile away, while a second and a third were climbing against the sky, gaining altitude to dive.

They couldn't last another thirty seconds, couldn't even hope to reach the doubtful cover of the rocks . . . Up ahead, two hundred yards, was a low mound, only a few feet high, the only nearby elevation of any sort. And it was plainly artificial, though wind-piled sand had softened its outlines; others like it were scattered around the periphery of the great sink, and Dworn guessed their nature as he saw a column of the aluminum crawlers beginning to emerge from the side of the one just ahead. It must be the other end of a tunnel such as they had dis-

covered among the cliffs . . .

He nudged Qanya urgently, shouted, "Head for that!"

She gave him a fleeting, wide-eyed look. The mound's low swell could furnish no shelter for the towering spider, and the tunnel mouth was of course much too small to enter. But she veered without slackening speed in the direction indicated.

Dworn abandoned the useless guns. The mound, with a gleaming line of crawlers still parading out of it, swept closer; and at the same time the desert echoed back the screaming onrush of the two new attackers.

Dworn wrenched open the cabin door with one hand. His other arm circled Qanya's waist, dragged her away from the controls. She cried in uncomprehending shock as he swung her before him into the open doorway. They swayed there, high above the speeding ground, wind whipping at them as the spider pounded blindly on.

The mound loomed immediately at hand. Dworn prayed that he had judged the moment right, and with a mighty leap launched both of them out into space.

A pistoning steel leg barely missed them. Even as they fell, the air was torn by explosions as the swooping fliers opened fire.

DWORN hit the ground with almost stunning force. His hold on the girl was broken and he was rolled helplessly over and over by his own momentum. But he fetched up on hands and knees, bruised and breathless but unhurt.

From the corner of his eye he saw Qanya sitting up dizzily, half-buried in the drifted sand that had broken their fall. Apparently she too was uninjured, but she was staring in horrified fascination after her runaway machine.

The spider careened onward, no hand at its controls. It hit the line of crawling little machines coming from underground; it knocked one spinning end over end, and stepped squarely on another, stamping it flat. It recovered its balance amazingly, and loped on, even though one leg was buckling beneath it—

Then it was hit dead-on by what must have been at least a hundred-pound high explosive rocket.

The winged killers shot low overhead with an exultant whoop of jets, peeling off to right and left of the column of smoke that rose and towered where the spider had been struck. Out of the cloud, metal fragments soared glinting upward and arced back to earth, and on the ground, amid smoke and dust, a metal limb was briefly visible, flexing convulsively and

growing still.

Dworn heard a smothered sound beside him. A tear rolled down Qanya's smudged cheek, and Dworn thought fuzzily, *Even spiders can cry. Only, he corrected, she's not a spider any more she's now just a ghost like me.*

If he hadn't been a ghost already, if he hadn't lost his own machine—the idea of jumping clear and saving both their human lives while letting the spider be destroyed would never have occurred to him.

He came to himself, hissed, "Down! Keep low and maybe they'll overlook us!"

They huddled together on the slope of the sandhill, while the victorious flying enemy circled round in a miles-wide sweep and began descending toward their base again, wing-flaps braking them for landing.

And on the ground meanwhile, the crawlers which had come from the tunnel were proceeding on their way, leaving two of their number behind with strange indifference to their own casualties.

"What'll we do?" quavered Qanya.

Dworn had time to take stock of the situation. The tunnel-mound was, as he had seen before, the only cover—and that a poor one—for a considerable distance. It was all

of a quarter mile to the edge beyond which the cliffs fell away.

He tried to sound hopeful—whether for Qanya's sake or to keep up his own courage, he could hardly have said. "I think we'll have to stay here, and hope we're not noticed, until it gets dark. Then, maybe—"

Qanya caught her breath sharply and gripped his arm. "Look—there!"

Still far away across the sloping floor of the great bowl, but rapidly approaching from its center, moved a dust cloud. Beneath it, the expiring sunlight glinted on the aluminum shells of at least a score of the ground machines.

Dworn said grimly, "Might have expected it; they'll be coming to look over the scene of action and pick up the pieces. We've one chance; keep out of sight behind this little hill, and maybe they won't investigate too closely."

Qanya nodded, biting her lip. She could reckon as well as he how much that chance was worth.

THE buzzing motors came nearer. The two cowering in the lee of the mound, almost without daring to breathe, heard them halt, slow to idling speed one by one a little way off, where the wrecked spider lay. From that spot obscure sounds began rising, thutts and

gratings and a shrill hissing noise.

But then—the whine of a single high-speed engine rose again, clear to their hearing. One of the enemy was approaching around the flank of the sandhill.

They crouched motionless, frozen. No hope in either flight or fight; on the open ground, they would be run down in no time, and they had no weapons—even the notion of a weapon, as something apart from the fighting machine that carried it, was alien to their thinking.

The enemy vehicle rolled into full view and nosed slowly along the base of the mound; its motor whining questingly, only a few yards of gentle slope between it and the huddled pair. Its vision-ports glinted redly in the sunset glow, and Dworn could almost feel the raking of murderous eyes from behind them . . . Like the other machines of this kind he had seen it was small and without armor—it couldn't weigh more than a couple of thousand pounds, and it carried no guns. From the vantage of his armed and armored beetle, he had regarded its like as flimsy and harmless-looking . . . But now he realized for the first time how helpless a mere human was against such a thing, and, with an irrepressible shudder, how easily the grappling and cutting-tools this

one was equipped with might be employed for—dismantling—flesh and blood.

The machine paused momentarily. Then its engine revved up again. It rolled on past, giving no sign of excitement, and vanished beyond the hillside.

"Dworn, Dworn, it didn't see us!" Qanya was sobbing with relief.

Dworn was staring after the enemy, brows puzzledly drawn downward. The sounds from the other side of the mound went on uninterrupted—a clangor of metal, the prolonged shrilling of a cutting-torch, where evidently they were at work breaking up the smashed spider-vehicle.

He said huskily, "Something's very queer about them . . . Wait. I've got to take a look."

Qanya glanced at him in quick alarm as he started wriggling to the crest of the sandhill. Then she followed silently, and peered over the top beside him.

Twilight was descending, but they could still see easily enough what went on out there. Not a hundred yards away, the little machines swarmed about the spider, bringing their various wrecking equipment into play to dismantle it rapidly under the watchers' eyes. Torches flared, winches tugged at fragments of the shattered

monster. An aluminum cylinder with a serrated alligator snout rolled triumphantly away, bearing aloft the shank of a great steel leg. . .

But Dworn's attention was riveted by what was happening closer at hand. Here, near the tunnel-entrance that opened just below their observation point, lay the two crawlers which the runaway spider had disabled. One of these, the one which had merely been overturned and severely dented, was already being dragged away, wheels still helplessly in the air, by a towing-machine. The other had been smashed beyond repair. Around it several of the new arrivals were busy, callously and efficiently beginning to take it apart.

Dworn watched them at it, and the dreadful suspicion that had budded in his mind ripened into a monstrous certainty.

Aluminum skin was swiftly stripped away; frame members of the same metal were clipped neatly asunder by a machine armed with great shearing jaws. The engine came loose and was hoisted aloft carried dangling away by another specialized machine. In an incredibly short time, little but a bare chassis remained, and that too was being attacked by the salvagers.

And Dworn knew at last beyond

all doubt, what manner of things these were.

Beside him he heard a sharp gasp, and turned to put a warning finger on Qanya's lips. He drew her gently back with him, out of view of the activities on the farther side of the mound.

"You understand what *that* means?"

The girl nodded soberly. "We have the tradition. I think that must be one tradition that all the peoples have in common."

"Then you know what we have to do."

She nodded again.

Between them the word hung unspoken—a word not to be uttered lightly, so awful was it in its connotations, freighted with memories of a terror rooted in the youth of the world.

Drones.

IN the beginning—said the stories—there were the ancients, who were great and powerful beyond the imagining of the latter-day peoples. But the ancients were divided among themselves, for some of them were good and some of them were evil.

So they fought one another, with the terrific weapons of devastation which they owned. And the good triumphed in the end, as it must—though at terrible cost, for in those

wars the earth was stripped almost lifeless; searing flame, plague, climatic convulsions wiped out the varied life which once populated the world, and finally there remained only the peoples of the machine, all of whom—diverse though their ways of existence had become, and for all that they lived in ceaseless conflict with each other—were descended from the victors in that primal struggle of men like gods.

But the evil old ones, though they were vanquished and their seed utterly annihilated, had nevertheless found a way to perpetuate their evil upon the earth. For before the last of them died, as a final act of vindictive atrocity, they created the drones. . . .

Qanya was shivering uncontrollably. She whispered, "No one remembers when they last came. Some thought there were none left in the world."

"It's the same among my people," Dworn said hushedly. "There's no record of the drones' having appeared in the time of anyone now living . . . But here they are."

From out of sight came the rattle and clank and whine of machines at work. And from farther away, from the direction of the great windowless buildings, there were hootings and throbbing

sounds, and from time to time a deep rumbling that shook the earth.

Those noises were somehow unspeakably horrible now—now that they knew there was no one there. No one—nothing but the machines, without feeling or thought, without life, with only the blind meaningless activity of unliving mechanism set in motion and made self-subsisting a thousand or two thousand years ago . . .

With infinite caution the two humans peeked once again over the summit of the mound. Out there on the flat, the little wingless drones buzzed to and fro with their false seeming of animation, finishing their work.

From around the great buildings, whose interior no living eyes had ever looked upon, lights winked oddly blue through the thickening dusk. They caught glimpses of immense moving machinery, and heard mysterious sounds. Once and again, it seemed that in the open space before the structures a great door opened in the earth, and against a blue light that streamed upward they saw a vast winged shape rise majestically from underground and roll slowly forward into the shadows to join others already ranked there.

"What are they doing?"

"I don't know . . ." Dworn re-

flected, grasping at memories of the legends, the traditions he had heard. What he recalled was ominous. "I think I can guess, though. I think they're getting ready to swarm."

Her stifled exclamation was sign enough that she understood.

If the guess was right, the danger was on the verge of being multiplied many times over. Soon now, a swarm of queen ships would take to the air and fly in all directions, sowing the seed of the robot plague broadcast far and wide; one such colonizing vessel, no doubt, had founded this great hive only a few months ago. The things worked fast. . . .

And Dworn's duty, and Qanya's, became all the more clear and urgent. Duty to spread the warning, at whatever risk to themselves. In the face of that, Dworn's mission of personal blood vengeance became unimportant—even if it had been possible to take such vengeance upon a foe with no life to forfeit.

He whispered to Qanya, "The ground machines are about to leave. When they're gone, we'll have to make a break for it." For some reason, as he pondered the distance they must cross to reach the Barrier cliffs, he recalled the strange revolving thing atop the central tower off yonder, turning

constantly with its air of restless searching . . . He swallowed painfully, repeated, "*Have to.*"

The girl nodded silently. Impulsively Dworn put his arm around her; she pressed close against him. They huddled together like that, finding in one another's living warmth some measure of encouragement against the terror of the falling night in which nothing moved but the lifeless machines.

THEY watched while the lights glimmered far off across the flats; while a flight of fighter drones took off from there and howled away into the dark on some roving patrol; while, at last, the salvaging machines finished their work and rolled loot-laden away one by one.

More than once while they waited, other columns of the wingless drones entered or emerged from the tunnel mouth at the base of the mound. The tempo of activity in the hive was, if anything, increased as night came on. In the deepening darkness a faint blue glow streamed from the tunnel mouth.

As the whirring of the last salvager receded, Dworn got cautiously to his feet. He said between his teeth, "We'd better move fast, now—"

"Wait," said Qanya tensely. "They'll sight us in the open, and then what chance will we have?"

Dworn tried to make out her expression, but in the darkness her face was only a white blur. "We've got to try. There's no other way."

"Perhaps there is. What about the tunnel?"

Dworn was brought up short; that idea hadn't occurred to him at all. He said slowly, "I see what you mean. It's only big enough for one-way traffic—and the drones evidently have some system of remote control, so that outbound expeditions aren't using it at the same time as returning ones. . ."

"So, if we wait till some of the wingless ones enter from this end, and hurry through the tunnel close behind them—" Qanya left the sentence uncompleted. Dworn knew she could imagine as well as he what would happen if they failed to time it right, and met a drone column coming from the opposite direction. Still, the sound sense of the girl's ideas was obvious.

"All right," he said. "We'll try it that way."

It was another nerve-fraying wait until a file of ground machines came winding near and vanished one after another into the tunnel.

The two watchers gave them a little time— not too much—to get clear of the entrance. Then Dworn clasped Qanya's hand tightly in his own, and together they plunged down the sliding slope of the sandhill. The tunnel mouth yawned in its side,, the bore on which it opened slanting steeply down into the earth, inwardly lit with eery blue light.

Hearts pounding, they raced into the tunnel.

It was an unreal, nightmare flight. The blue shaft curved and descended endlessly. Endlessly ahead of them echoed the snarling of drone engines.

They ran with lungs near to bursting, through air heavy and foul with exhaust gases—trying frantically to keep close behind that engine noise, while it receded inexorably before them. And once and again, amid the tricky tunnel echoes, Dworn was almost sure that other drones had entered and were descending the narrow way behind them, and before his eyes flashed hideous visions of the two of them overtaken and run down, here where there was scarcely room to turn, let alone fight or hide.

The featureless walls were pressing inward to crush them, swimming before eyes filmed with exhaustion, in the blue shimmer which no doubt sufficed for the

perceptions of the drones but which hardly served human vision. . . .

The tunnel was in fact perhaps a thousand yards long.

But it seemed as if they had been staggering for a lifetime through the nightmare, through the blue glow, and it scarcely seemed real when a patch of night sky showed through the exit before them, and when they stumbled panting out into the clean cold air of the mountainside, and saw the white radiance of moonrise over the Barrier cliffs above them.

They sank down to catch their breath on a rock not far from the tunnel. They'd made it none too soon—only a minute or two had passed when the night once more buzzed with motor noise, and a column of foraging drones rolled up the trail and plunged at full speed into the mouth of the shaft.

Qanya buried her face against Dworn's shoulder.

"Easy, now," Dworn whispered, patting her with clumsy gentleness. "The worst's over. We made it . . . Qanya, darling, we made it!"

She looked up at him and by the moonlight he saw her smile tremulously. She said breathlessly, "Would . . . would you mind saying that again, please?"

THE moon was already high as they trudged across the rolling desert beyond the foot of the great landslip.

After the tunnel, the rest of the descent had been relatively easy; they had followed the trail used by the wingless drones, being forced off it only once by the passage of a cavalcade of the little marauders. And they had discovered, to their surprise, that the human physique—inferior though it might be to machines in ruggedness, speed, and other respects—was better equipped for traversing rough terrain than the most ingenious vehicle ever constructed.

But both of them, unaccustomed as they were to walking on their own feet, were dead weary. They tramped on doggedly, searching the shadows, hoping to come upon some living machine-creature—of what race, didn't matter now.

So far they had seen only abundant evidence that the drones were abroad in force tonight, preparing perhaps for their swarming time. Drones in the air and on the ground, and once the burnt-out shell of an unidentifiable machine with a crew of the wingless salvagers worrying it, and once the light of fires afar off where the winged ones had made a kill . . .

Qanya stumbled, and Dworn caught her round the waist as she

swayed.

"Tired," she gasped in a little girl's voice, then stiffened her back with a resolute effort.

"We'd better rest—"

"No," she said shakily; and then abruptly: "*Listen!*"

Not very far away, lost somewhere among the tricky moon-shadows, there was a stealthy crunching. It was coming nearer.

With instinctive caution the two hugged the pool of shadow beside a boulder.

"Spiders!" Qanya recognized them first.

They came prowling out of the shadows, crunching rhythmically across an open moonlit space towards a hollow beyond. One, two, four of them, moving with furtive caution through the perilous night.

They had to be intercepted, the warning given. But it was a critically dangerous moment—suspicious and on edge, they might fire at the first movement they saw.

"Stay here," said Dworn shortly. He thrust Qanya back into the shadows, and walked steadfastly out into the clear moonlight, in the path of the walking spider machines.

He raised one hand on high, palm outward in an immemorial gesture that he could only hope would be seen. He shouted at the top of his voice, "Stop! Don't

shoot! I come in *peace!*"

His heart leaped. The leading spider ground to a halt, and the others behind it. He saw a dim figure move atop the foremost towering machine; and before he could speak again, heard the rasping voice of the Spider Mother herself.

"You! The one who got away—and who seduced one of *us* from the ways of her ancestors—? What peace can there be between you and us?"

"I bring," cried Dworn clearly, "warning of the Drone."

There was stunned silence.

Dworn sensed the other spiders watching from the height of their machines; and he guessed something of what must be going on in the mind of the fierce old woman staring down at him. She would be wondering if an alien, a mere beetle, would be so far without honor, so anxious to save his own skin, as to lie in such a matter.

Then he felt Qanya's hand in his, and heard her cry out, her voice vibrant and assured: "It is true, Mother! I have seen them too. The night-fliers, the raiders—they are the evil things our legends tell of!"

The great machine took two steps forward and knelt low to the ground. "Come here!" rasped the Spider Mother, and when the two

advanced till she could look into their young faces—"You swear to this?"

"We swear!" they said at the same moment.

The Spider Mother's face was like iron. She looked from one to the other slowly.

"Then," she said stiffly and formally, leaning over to extend a wrinkled hand to Dworn, "let there be peace between us. . . . between me and mine and you and yours, and among all living peace . . . till the evil is no more!"

Dworn took the hand, and answered, hurriedly recalling ancient custom: "Till the evil is no more!" And heard Qanya echo the words.

ALL night the desert was stirring, with a feverish hastening of messengers. These were at first spiders—then, members of a half dozen, a dozen other races, as the word was passed from one people to another—as tribe after tribe of hardbitten, suspicious warriors, fingers, fidgeting on triggers at the open approach of their hereditary mortal foes, heard and were electrified by the news—

The Coming of the Drone!

And hand gripped hand, all feuds were forgotten, the peoples mingled in a common effort of hurried mobilization. The desert land below the cliffs crawled with them,

a mixed multitude of constantly increasing numbers, girding themselves for war.

Ferocious predatory machines—spiders, wheel-bugs, scorpions—formidable in their armor and bristling with guns, lay alongside the more pacific slugs and caterpillars and snails which in ordinary times were their natural prey, and were freely fuelled and provisioned out of the stores which normally their possessors would have fought to the death to safeguard against the despoilers

In the presence of the drones, there were no more natural enmities. For the drones were the Enemy. Their coming meant that all life was kindred; deep in the heritage of every people was the almost instinctive knowledge that, if the drones were not checked as tradition decreed, their blind automatic propagation would end by sweeping every living thing from the face of the Earth.

Toward morning, the chiefs of a score of tribes held council of war in the very shadow of the Barrier. Their consultation was brief; there was no arguable question of what must be done, only of how. And if the drones were about to swarm, they must act promptly. No time to wait for the gathering of more distant peoples; no time to send word to the wasps or the hornets

and gain aerial support. They must strike with what they had.

DWORN started awake as a hand touched his shoulder. He sat up, angrily flinging a coverlet from him.

"I didn't intend to sleep!" he muttered, rubbing his eyes and realizing where he was—below ground in the spiders' colony, whether he and Qanya had been taken and where he had been persuaded to lie down and rest a little while the warning was carried by others.

The tall blonde spider, Purri, was grinning maliciously down at him. "Hear the beetle talk! I suppose, after a day spent in what, for you was comparative idleness, you felt like doing something really strenuous . . . say going out and demolishing the drones' hive barehanded. . . .?"

Dworn climbed to his feet. With a violent effort he kept from wincing at the protest of stiffened muscles and yesterday's collection of bruises.

"What's going on out there now? Where's Qanya?"

"There's really nothing more *you* can do, you know. I merely woke you because I thought you'd want to hear that your beetle-folk have been contacted—they'd holed up to lick their wounds about twenty miles south of here—and

have joined the fighting force that's getting ready to attack the drones at dawn. As for dear little Qanya, she's sleeping angelically in the next chamber. . . ."

"No, she isn't," said Qanya from the doorway.

"You, too?" said Purri with irritation. "And what do you want, scapegrace?"

Qanya's black eyes narrowed dangerously. She moved forward to Dworn's side and took a grip on his arm. "I might ask what you're doing here disturbing—"

"Both of you, you're wasting time," growled Dworn.

He'd heard with a queer pang that his people—those who remained alive—had been located. Not that it made any real difference, of course. His father was dead, and he, Dworn, was dead too as far as his own kind was concerned. Nor, in this world, was there anywhere else he could turn.

For the present, under the threat of the Drone, that didn't matter. All laws of all peoples were in abeyance for the duration of the great emergency. But once the threat was dissolved, and the old laws resumed their force, the plight of Dworn and of Qanya also would be what it had been—that of outcasts in a world where an outcast had no chance of survival.

Well, it was no use thinking of

the future. Dworn said determinedly: "I want to see the end of this business, at least"

"And I!" declared Qanya. "We've earned that right."

Purri eyed them sourly, shrugged. "As you like. I'm in command here while the Mother's busy at the front. I'll see you get transportation up there." Turning toward the door, she glanced sidelong at Dworn . . . "You'll have to go separately, since a spider will only carry two. I'm leaving right away myself; *you* may come with me in my machine—"

"No, he won't," declared Qanya with finality, tightening her hold on Dworn's arm. "He can ride with old Zimka."

Purri stalked through the doorway before them, grumbling to herself, "Why is it the best ones always get away?"

EARLIER in the night, climbing spiders—the only machines which could manage the ascent of the toppled Barrier—had scouted the periphery of the drones' fortress, and discovered the sole possible approach to it. At a single spot above the slide, a low ridge made it feasible to surmount the rim and steal out onto the table-land beyond without coming in direct view of the enemy's installations.

Once that was known, the coun-

cil of chiefs decided on a daring strategy. Up the thousand-foot slope of tumbled rocks below that one vulnerable point, a fantastic supply line was established. One by one, machines from among those massing on the desert below toiled upward until wheels or treads could carry them no further; then they were hoisted bodily over the precipices by the invaluable spiders, who anchored themselves firmly in place with the powerful steel cables they ordinarily used for snaring prey, and used other such cables as pulleys.

Through the remaining hours of darkness the joined forces labored with Herculean devotion to accomplish the seemingly impossible task. There were brushes with the enemy, for the wingless drones still came and went about the mountainside and from time to time their winged kindred flew overhead. But strict orders had gone out to all the allied peoples—avoid opening fire, avoid precipitating a general engagement, and freeze motionless whenever the fliers passed over. This last instruction rested on the observation that the robot predators, with whatever sensory devices they used, apparently had difficulty in spotting anything but a moving target.

In this wise, when dawn began

to break, close to three hundred first-line fighting machines of a dozen different species had been raised to the summit of the Barrier. Thence they filtered cautiously out across the plateau, in a great arc moving to enclose the hollow of the drones.

THE sky was lightening when Dworn and Qanya settled themselves to watch from the crest of the rocky ridge which had shielded the attacking forces' deployment not far from the brink of the cliffs.

Behind them, the spiders which had brought them here melted stealthily away toward the east, going to take their places in the battle line.

The two were alone once more, looking out over the vast circular depression infested by the enemy, just as they had yesterday at sunset. But today, as the sun rose, the situation was very different. For miles around the circumference of the great hive, there were furtive stirrings, last-minute movements of preparation for the imminent assault. From behind every outcropping and fold of the ground, grim gun-muzzles pointed inward, ready to begin spitting fire when the zero second came.

From here the central buildings of the hive were plainly visible,

standing out against the sunrise. Around them moved many of the tireless worker machines; and the parked aircraft seemed more numerous than they had been the night before. Among them a score or more of winged shapes loomed conspicuous for their great size; when you made proper allowance for the distance, you realized that they were immense.

Those would be the queens—loaded and ready to take flight on their oneway journey to found new colonies wherever their evil destiny might lead them. The time of swarming was near.

Dworn scowled darkly, squinting against the light in an effort to judge the enemy's numbers. He grunted, "I hope . . ." and bit his lip.

"What's wrong?" said Qanya tensely.

"Nothing . . . Only it would have been well if we'd had time to bring up more reinforcements. But don't worry—we'll smash them." He was a little surprised to note that he said "we"—and meant any and all of the machine-peoples, united now in a common cause.

Dworn was bitterly wishing at this moment that he had had his beetle-machine again, and had been able to take an active part. As it was, he didn't even know surely just where in the battle line

the beetles had taken up their position.

A distant explosion, a single gunshot, rolled echoless across the flats. It was a signal. Even as the shell hit the ground close to the ranked drone aircraft, motors had begun to pulse and snarl all along the farflung line. The desert began to spew forth attackers. A motley horde of metal things, they darted, stalked, and lumbered from their lurking-places, and as they advanced to the assault the firing commenced in earnest, became a staccato thunder that blanketed but failed to drown out the beginning alarm-wail of a huge mechanical voice from the fortress of the drones.

The enemy was not slow to react. Almost as the first rain of projectiles smashed down among them, jet engines began howling into life, and some of the fighter craft rocked into motion, wheeling out onto the runways.

The encircling attackers well knew the peril of letting any of those pilotless killers get into the air. Shellfire was being concentrated on the airstrips, striving to block them, plow them up with craters.

A fighter drone came roaring out one of the runaways gathering speed and beginning to

lift. Dworn followed it with his eyes, feeling sweat spring out on his forehead, repeating under his breath without conscious awareness of what he was saying: "Stop him, stop him—"

Then the enemy craft spun round in the air, belching smoke, came apart and spilled along the runway for a hundred yards. A second, coming close behind it, plowed into the wreckage of its comrade, rolled over and over and became a furiously burning pyre. That strip was blocked.

All round the central hive smoke and flame were rising in innumerable places, from the paved ways and from the open desert. On another launching strip, just visible through the mounting inferno, one of the big queen-craft had sought to take to the air, and had been knocked out by heavy shellfire. Now its upended and blazing hulk tilted slowly over and collapsed burying beneath it several of the little wingless workers. In all the confusion these still scurried hither any yon, oblivious to the bombardment, laboring frantically but futilely to clear away the debris. Their efforts were useless, while the rain of explosives from the tightening ring of assault forces continued adding to the ruin and disorder within the hive. . . .

Dworn sprang to his feet for a

better view. He hugged Qanya to him till she gasped for breath, shouted in her ear over the thunder of the barrage, "*We've got them!*"

Close to the ridge where they stood a line of many-wheeled monsters rolled past—scorpions, moving along the battle front and, whenever the thickening smoke up ahead revealed a target, halting to wheel round and discharge their heavy-caliber tail guns.

Dworn had never liked scorpions, but he watched these with heartfelt approval.

Then he stared, bewilderedly aware that something had gone wrong. The big machines had turned and begun heading toward the ridge, clattering along at their top speed and no longer pausing to fire.

Within moments, Dworn perceived that all the other attackers were doing likewise; everywhere on the blazing battlefield, they had ceased their advance and were scattering to seek cover.

Only then, as the firing slackened, did he realize that the sky had begun to echo with a spiteful screaming of flying things. Against the brightening daylight hurtled some two dozen dark winged shapes. . . . fighter drones.

Dworn realized they must have been out on patrol, and summoned back by the drones' mysterious

means of communication to defend the threatened hive. Now the flight was splitting into groups of two or three, diving to attack at one point and another and flitting away again so swiftly that human reflexes could scarcely act to train a gun.

Dworn glimpsed Qanya's horrified face beside him, and the girl threw her weight against him and dragged him down among the sheltering rocks. Overhead, from out of the sun, shot three of the winged drones. They passed over before the shrieking of their flight could reach the ears, and Dworn caught a glimpse of bombs tumbling earthward. Thunder crashed as the scorpions hugging the ridge threw up a vicious defensive barrage, and was drowned out as the bombs landed all around. The rocks heaved, and dust and splinters showered down from above.

Only a dozen yards away, a scorpion came rumbling up across the crest, its many wheels jolting over the rocks, and halted there, its tail gun weaving angrily as it sought vainly for targets in the sky. Along one of its gray-painted sides was a long bright gash where something had barely glanced from its armor. And Dworn saw, too, the black outline of a mythological arachnid on its observation turret, which signified that

the machine belonged to a scorpion chief.

SCARCELY knowing what he intended, he shook off Qanya's panic grip and plunged recklessly toward the big machine. As he scrambled over the rugged hilltop, he saw fleetingly what went on in the arena of battle—the allied peoples were being driven back, forced to concentrate their fire power on beating off aerial onslaughts. Meantime, the wingless drones about their beleaguered citadel worked feverishly to clear the way for their fighters that still remained undamaged on the ground . . . Within minutes, unless something happened to turn the tide, there would be enough flying drones aloft to break the attack and inflict terrible losses.

Dworn found himself alongside the scorpion, just as its tail gun fired once more. The muzzle blast almost knocked him down, but he clawed his way up the side of the machine and began hammering on the observation turret hatch-cover.

"You in there!" he shouted. "Listen to me—"

The hatch cracked open and a grizzled head peered out, blinking at him with bewilderment and an automatic fierce suspicion. But at a time like this anything human was an ally.

"What's the idea?" demanded the scorpion.

The racket of gunfire and of jets made speech almost impossible. But Dworn pointed out across the sink, shouted: "Fire on the buildings—the central tower! They're controlled from somewhere—"

Luckily the scorpion leader—if that was who he was—was a man of quick understanding. He nodded vigorously and dropped out of sight again into the interior of his vehicle, bawling something to its driver. Dworn dropped off the machine's side as it lurched abruptly into motion. He watched, hardly breathing, as it slid to a halt at the bottom of the hill beside another of its tribe, and with shouts and gestures the word was passed on.

Inside a minute, all the nearby scorpions had begun banging away at the structures some three miles distant. The heavy scorpion guns were quite capable of carrying that far, and their shells had enough punch to do much damage to the buildings or to the central tower which still loomed occasionally visible through the drifting smoke . .

But it was only a hope, perhaps even a forlorn hope. Dworn was fairly confident of his guess that the drones possessed some sort of central communication and control system—but it would take a lucky

hit to disable that nerve center in time.

Qanya stumbled to his side. She cried something he couldn't hear over the continuous firing, tugged at him and pointed skyward with terror in her eyes.

The flying drones aloft had suddenly abandoned their scattered strafing attacks. With deadly machine-precision they wheeled into a single formation once more, and the whole flight came diving straight at the scorpion battery's position.

Dworn stood rigid, fists clenched at his sides, watching them scream nearer.

He ignored Qanya's pleading with him to take cover. No point to that—the drones' full force would blast the whole ridge to rubble and blanket it with their liquid flame.

At least, the enemy's reaction proved his inspiration correct. He noticed with fierce satisfaction that the scorpions were still doggedly firing. . . .

The foremost drone came on, slanting down the sky until the gaping rocket-ports were plainly visible along its swept-back wings. But those sports still spat no flame. And it came on. It cleared the hilltop by no more than fifty feet, still diving faster than the speed of sound. It hit the desert slope

beyond and ricocheted like a great projectile, bursting apart into fiery fragments that strewed themselves for a thousand yards across the rolling plateau.

DWORN picked himself up from among the rocks where he had been flung by the shock-wave of its near passage, and was knocked sprawling again by the earthquake impact of a second drone that thundered headlong into the earth a few hundred feet away, burying itself under a crater like that of a huge bomb.

He glimpsed a third craft going down to the west of them, just missing the rim of the Barrier cliffs and plunging out of sight without a sign of coming out of its dive.

Those which remained in the air were flying aimlessly. Two of them passed over side by side, gradually converging until, a couple of miles away, they locked wings and went spinning down toward the horizon in a deadly embrace.

On the ground, a like confusion had befallen the wingless workers. Their scurrying suddenly lost all its busy, planned efficiency. Some buzzed round and round in drunken circles; others ran head-on into one another, or tumbled into shell-holes to lie futilely spinning their wheels.

A hush descended on the field

of battle. After the fury of bombardment and counterattack, the relative silence was deafening.

Dworn got to his feet for the second time and helped Qanya up; he grinned exultantly at her, oblivious of a trickle of blood running down his face where a rock-splinter had hit.

The scorpion lying nearest the foot of the slope opened its hatch-cover. A man climbed out, clasped hands together over his head and stamped on the gray monster's back in an awkward impromptu victory-dance. Cheers rang faintly from far off down the silenced firing-line.

Then—the spell of premature triumph was rudely shattered.

From the direction of the breached and smoking buildings, there rose yet again the soughing roar of jet engines gathering speed. Onto the runway to the west—the only one which the workers had managed to clear before their central control was knocked out—came waddling an enormous winged thing.

Its multiple engines screamed up to a frenzied pitch, and it rolled out along the strip at increasing velocity. Its huge wheels narrowly missed a dead fighter slewed across the way. Its tail went up.

Naturally, the queen ships wouldn't be dependent on the

nerve-center of the hive that had spawned them; for each of them carried within itself the full-grown robot brain, the nucleus of a new hive. . . .

Shooting began again raggedly, the gunners caught unawares. Perhaps the great machine was hit—but to stop it would take more than one or two hits.

It reached and passed the end of the runway, its wheels barely clearing the ground as the paved strip ended. Black smoke belched from its engines as it spent fuel lavishly, fighting heavy-laden for altitude. It rocked with the concussion of shells bursting all around it, and then it was soaring out over the Barrier, dipping and rolling perilously in the downdrafts beyond the cliffs. But it steadied and flew on, out of range of the guns, rising and dwindling until it was a speck, a mote vanishing into the western sky . . .

But no more queens escaped that day. The cannonade resumed with redoubled fury, and the guns did not fall silent until nothing was left to stir amid the gutted and blazing wreckage that had been the citadel of the drones.

MORNING wind blew over the plateau, clearing away the reek of battle, bringing air that was cool and clear as it must have been

in the morning of the world.

In that breeze like the breath of a new creation, it somehow seemed not at all strange to Dworn that he should be walking in the open under a daylight sky, among a multitude of excited strangers, men and women of all races, who mixed and exchanged greetings, laughed, shouted, slapped one another on the back . . . then, perhaps, drew away for a moment with eyes of wonder at their own boldness . . .

Nor did it seem strange that Dworn strolled round the smoldering drone fortress hand in hand with a girl of the spider (who was by that token his hereditary foe,) and that he turned and kissed this enemy on the mouth, and she returned the kiss.

They stood with arms around one another, on the edge of the jubilant crowd, and looked out across the vast litter of smoking wreckage where scarcely a shell-holed wall stood upright now, from which the Enemy would no longer come to threaten the life of the Earth.

"One got away," said Qanya soberly.

"Yes. Somewhere it will all be to do over again." Dworn glanced toward the empty west, whither the queen flier had disappeared—where, perhaps, by now it would have crash-landed two or three

hundred miles away, to spew forth its cargo of pygmy workers and (if the inhabitants or the area where it descended didn't discover and scotch it in time) to construct more workers, fighters, a hive no less formidable than the one that had perished today.

Dworn said, brow thoughtfully furrowed: "But maybe there's a good reason, even for the drones. Maybe they serve a purpose . . ." He faltered, unable to phrase the idea that had come to him—a thought that was not only unaccustomed but downright heretical. According to tradition the drones were the spawn of ancient evil and themselves wholly evil—but, Dworn was thinking, perhaps their existence produced good if, once in a generation or in ten generations, they came to remind the warring peoples that fundamentally all life was one in its eonlong conflict with no-life.

But he sensed, too, that that idea would take a long, long time to be worked out, to be communicated, to bear fruit . . .

Qanya's hand pressed his, and she said softly, "I think I know what you mean."

On one impulse they turned their backs to the ruins and gazed out across the throng of people, milling happily about, rejoicing, among the grim war-machines that stood

open and abandoned on every hand. Near by, a crew of pill-bugs had tapped containers of the special beverage they brewed for their own use, and were inviting all passersby to pause and drink.

"Your people are here somewhere," said Qanya. Her eyes on Dworn were troubled. "Over there to the south, I think I saw some beetles parked. Do you want to visit them?"

Dworn sighed. "Your people are here too."

"I know."

NEITHER of them moved. They stood silent, their thoughts the same; in a little while now, the Peace of the Drone would be over, and all this celebrating crowd would grow warily quiet, would climb back into their various fighting machines, close the hatches and man the guns and creep away in their separate directions. The world would go its way again, a world in which there was no place left for the two of them . .

Dworn blotted the image from his mind's eye and bent to kiss Qanya once more, while the Peace lasted.

A voice called, "Dworn!" A familiar voice—one that couldn't be real, that must be a trick of his ears.

He turned. A little way off

stood a small group of people watching them, and in the forefront was a stalwart man of fifty, in the green garment of a beetle with a golden scarab blazoned on his chest—

"*Father!*" Dworn gasped unbelieving.

They grasped one another's hands and looked into one another's eyes. Dworn was only dimly aware of the others looking on—among them the hard-faced Spider Mother, and the grizzled chief scorpion whose cohorts had struck the decisive blow in the battle.

Yold smiled with a quizzically raised eyebrow. "You thought I was dead, no doubt? You came on the spot where we were attacked and you saw—"

Dworn nodded and gulped. "I couldn't have been mistaken. I saw your machine there, wrecked . . . And now I've lost mine." His voice trailed off miserably.

His father gave him a penetrating look. "I see. You're supposing that means everything is over."

"Doesn't it?"

The chief smiled again. "When you departed for your wander-year, you were still a boy, though you'd learned your lessons and your beetle traditions well . . . But now you're a man. We don't tell boys everything."

Dworn stared at his father,

while understanding dawned like a glory upon him. To live again, the life he'd thought lost—

"So far as I could learn, your beetle was disabled through no fault of your own. In fact, by what these strangers tell me—" Yold nodded towards the Spider Mother and the scorpion chief—"you've proved yourself worthy indeed, over and above the customary testing. Of course, there will be the formality of a rebirth ceremony—which I have to undergo, too, so we can both do so together."

Dworn couldn't speak. Once again he had to remind himself that a beetle warrior didn't weep—not even tears of joy.

Then the Spider Mother spoke up, her voice brittle and metallic. "The girl will naturally be returned to us. After this business, I am going to have to take pains to restore discipline in the Family."

Dworn saw Qanya's desolate face, took one step to the girl's side and put a shielding arm around her. He felt Qanya trembling, and glared at the Spider Mother's implacable face.

"I won't go back!" Qanya cried vehemently. "I'll die first! I never wanted to be a spider, anyway!"

"And I," growled Dworn, "won't let you take her. I won't let her go—" his face was pale, but he went on resolutely—"even if it

means I can't return to my own people."

The beetle chief surveyed the two young people gravely, then turned to confront the old woman. He said, "I don't see that you have any further claim on the girl. According to our customs, she too can be 'reborn'—this time into the beetle horde, as one of my people—and my son's."

The head scorpion, looking on, nodded approval and grinned encouragingly at Dworn.

The Spider Mother and the chief exchanged a long, stony look—on either side, the look of a ruler used to command.

"It would be too bad," said Yold softly, "to mar the Peace. But my warriors are within call, and . . ."

The Spider Mother turned away and spat. "Have it your way. Who wants weaklings in the Family!"

The chief glanced sidelong at Dworn and Qanya, and saw that they were wholly absorbed in one another. With an open-handed gesture he invited the Spider Mother to follow him.

"Shall we go, then," he suggested politely, "and—while the Peace still reigns—find out whether the pill-bugs' beverage is all they claim it is?"

THE END



Death - Rain

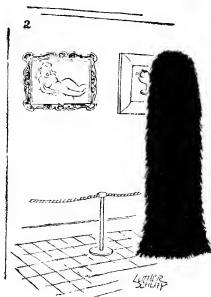
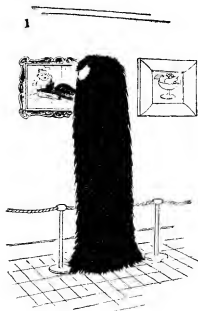


A LITTLE known concomitant of the fearsome hydrogen bomb is the death rain. This dramatic name is given the prosaic fall of dust which accompanies the hydrogen bomb explosion. In itself it would not be startling except for the fact that the dust is extremely radioactive! For an area of hundreds of square miles around an exploded hydrogen bomb is rife with a rain of lethal dust particles.

The Japanese fishermen who were exposed to it are testimony to its effectiveness and they, the-

oretically, were well without its range. What must it be like within the range?

So far as is known the only possible way to resist this deadly dust is by cover and shelter. It can be removed from the skin by repeated washing, but if it filters into the lungs nothing can be done. It would seem that respirators or gas masks will be as familiar in any future as they have been in the past ones. Horrors pile upon horrors when the hydrogen bomb explodes—is there no limit?



Comfort Me, My Robot

by

Robert Bloch

Henson knew his wife was holding a guilty secret from him. This was intolerable and only one thing could quiet his anxiety — killing her!

WHEN Henson came in, the Adjustor was sitting inside his desk, telescreening a case. At the sound of the doortone he flicked a switch. The posturchair rose from the center of the desk until the Adjustor's face peered at the visitor from an equal level.

"Oh, it's you," said the Adjustor.

"Aren't you a bit early for dinner? Our engagement isn't until five."

"This isn't an engagement," Henson told him. "It's an appointment."

"Appointment?"

"Didn't the girl tell you? I'm here to see you professionally."

If the Adjustor was surprised, he didn't show it. He cocked a thumb at a posturchair. "Sit down and tell me all about it, Henson," he said.

"Nothing to tell." Henson stared

out of the window at the plains of Upper Mongolia. "It's just a routine matter. I'm here to make a request and you're the Adjustor."

"And your request is —?"

"Simple," said Henson. "I want to kill my wife."

The Adjustor nodded. "That can be arranged," he murmured. "Of course, it will take a few days."

"I can wait."

"Would Friday be convenient?"

"Good enough. That way it won't cut into my week-end. Lita and I were planning a fishing trip, up NewZealand way. Care to join us?"

"Sorry, but I'm tied up until Monday." The Adjustor stifled a yawn. "Why do you want to kill Lita?" he asked.

"She's hiding something from me."

"What do you suspect?"



"That's just it — I don't know what to suspect. And it keeps bothering me."

"Why don't you question her?"

"Violation of privacy. Surely you, as a certified public Adjustor, wouldn't advocate that?"

"Not professionally." The Adjustor grinned. "But since we're personal friends, I don't mind telling you that there are times when

I think privacy should be violated. This notion of individual rights can become a fetish."

"Fetish?"

"Just an archaicism." The Adjustor waved a casual dismissal to the word. He leaned forward. "Then, as I understand it, your wife's attitude troubles you. Rather than embarrass her with questions, you propose to solve the problem

delicately, by killing her."

"Right."

"A very chivalrous attitude. I admire it."

"I'm not sure whether I do or not," Henson mused. "You see, it really wasn't my idea. But the worry was beginning to affect my work, and my Administrator—Loring, you know him, I believe—took me aside for a talk. He suggested I see you and arrange for a murder."

"Then it's to be murder." The Adjustor frowned. "You know, actually, we are supposed to be the arbiters when it comes to method. In some cases a suicide works just as well. Or an accident."

"I want a murder," Henson said. "Premeditated, and in the first degree." Now it was his turn to grin. "You see, I know a few archaisms myself."

The Adjustor made a note. "As long as we're dealing in archaic terminology, might I characterize your attitude towards your wife as one of—jealousy?"

Henson controlled his blush at the sound of the word. He nodded slowly. "I guess you're right," he admitted. "I can't bear the idea of her having any secrets. I know it's immature and absurd, and that's why I'm seeking an immature solution."

"Let me correct you," said the

Adjustor. "Your solution is far from immature. A good murder is probably the most adult approach to your problem. After all, man, this is the twenty-second century, not the twentieth. Although even way back then they were beginning to learn some of the answers."

"Don't tell me they had Adjustors," Henson murmured.

"No, of course not. In those days this field was only a small, neglected part of physical medicine. Practitioners were called psychiatrists, psychologists, auditors, analysts—and a lot of other things. That was their chief stock in trade, by the way; name-calling and labelling."

THE Adjustor gestured toward the slide-files. "I must have five hundred spools transcribed there," he calculated. "All of it from books—nineteenth, twentieth, even early twenty-first century material. And it's largely terminology, not technique. Psychotherapy was just like alchemy in those days. Everything was named and defined. Inability to cope with environment was minutely broken down into hundreds of categories, thousands of terms. There were 'schools' of therapy, with widely divergent theories and applications. And the crude attempts at technique they used—

you wouldn't believe it unless you studied what I have here! Everything from trying to 'cure' a disorder in one session by means of brain-surgery or electric shock to the other extreme of letting the 'patient' talk about his problems for thousands of hours over a period of years."

He smiled. "I'm afraid I'm letting my personal enthusiasm run away with me. After all, Henson, you aren't interested in the historical aspects. But I did have a point I wanted to make. About the maturity of murder as a solution-concept."

Henson adjusted the postur-chair as he listened.

"As I said, even back in the twentieth century, they were beginning to get a hint of the answer. It was painfully apparent that some of the techniques I mention weren't working at all. 'Sublimation' and 'catharsis' helped but did not cure in a majority of cases. Physical therapy altered and warped the personality. And all the while, the answer lay right before their eyes.

"Let's take your twentieth-century counterpart for an example. Man named Henson, who was jealous of his wife. He might go to an analyst for years without relief. Whereas if he did the sensible thing, he'd take an axe to her and

kill her.

"Of course, in the twentieth century such a procedure was antisocial and illegal. Henson would be sent to prison for the rest of his life.

"But the chances are, he'd function perfectly thereafter. Having relieved his psychic tension by the common-sense method of direct action, he'd have no further difficulty in adjustment.

"Gradually the psychiatrists observed this phenomenon. They learned to distinguish between the psychopath and the perfectly normal human being who sought to relieve an intolerable situation. It was hard, because once a normal man was put in prison, he was subject to new tensions and stresses which caused fresh aberrations. But these aberrations stemmed from his confinement—not from the impulses which led him to kill." Again the Adjustor paused. "I hope I'm not making this too abstruse for you," he said. "Terms like 'psychopath' and 'normal' can't have much meaning to a layman."

"I understand what you're driving at," Henson told him. "Go ahead. I've always wondered how Adjustment evolved, anyway."

"I'll make it brief from now on," the Adjustor promised. "The next crude step was something called the 'psychodrama.' It was a

simple technique in which an aberrated individual was encouraged to get up on a platform, before an audience, and act out his fantasies—including those involving aggression and violently antisocial impulses. This afforded great relief. Well, I won't trouble you with the historical details about the establishment of Master Control, right after North America went under in the Blast. We got it, and the world started afresh, and one of the groups set up was Adjustment. All of physical medicine, all of what was then called sociology and psychiatry, came under the scope of this group. And from that point on we started to make real progress.

"Adjustors quickly learned that old-fashioned therapies must be discarded. Naming or classifying a mental disturbance didn't necessarily overcome it. Talking about it, distracting attention from it, teaching the patient a theory about it, were not solutions. Nor was chopping out or shocking out part of his brain-structure.

"More and more we came to rely on direct action as a cure, just as we do in physical medicine.

"Then, of course, robotics came along and gave us the final answer. And it is the answer, Henson—that's the thought I've been trying to convey. Because we're

friends, I know you well enough to eliminate all the preliminaries. I don't have to give you a battery of tests, check reactions, and go through the other formalities. But if I did, I'm sure I'd end up with the same answer—in your case, the mature solution is to murder your wife as quickly as possible. That will cure you."

"Thanks," said Henson. "I knew I could count on you."

"No trouble at all." The Adjustor stood up. He was a tall, handsome man with curly red hair, and he somewhat towered over Henson who was only six feet and a bit too thin.

"You'll have papers to sign, of course," the Adjustor reminded him. "I'll get everything ready by Friday morning. If you'll step in then, you can do it in ten minutes."

"Fine," Henson smiled. "Then I think I'll plan the murder for Friday evening, at home. I'll get Lita to visit her mother in Saigon overnight. Best if she doesn't know about this until afterwards."

"Thoughtful of you," the Adjustor agreed. "I'll have her robot requisitioned for you from Inventory. Any special requirements?"

"I don't believe so. It was made less than two years ago, and it's almost a perfect match. Paid al-

most seven thousand for the job."

"That's a lot of capital to destroy." The Adjustor sighed. "Still, it's necessary. Will you want anything else—weapons, perhaps?"

"No." Henson stood in the doorway. "I think I'll just strangle her."

"Very well, then. I'll have the robot here and operating for you on Friday morning. And you'll take your robot too."

"Mine? Why, might I ask?"

"Standard procedure. You see, we've learned something more about the mind—about what used to be called a 'guilt complex'. Sometimes a man isn't freed by direct action alone. There may be a peculiar desire for punishment involved. In the old days many men who committed actual murders had this need to be caught and punished. Those who avoided capture frequently punished themselves. They developed odd psychosomatic reactions — some even committed suicide.

"In case you have any such impulses, your robot will be available to you. Punish it any way you like—destroy it, if necessary. That's the sensible thing to do."

"Right. See you Friday morning, then. And many thanks." Henson started through the doorway. He looked back and grinned. "You know, just thinking about it makes

me feel better already!"

HENSON whizzed back to the Adjustor's office on Friday morning. He was in rare good humor all the way. Anticipation was a wonderful thing. Everything was wonderful, for that matter.

Take robots, for example. The simple, uncomplicated mechanisms did all the work, all the drudgery. Their original development for military purposes during the twenty-first century was forgotten now, along with the concept of war which had inspired their creation. Now the automatons functioned as workers.

And for the well-to-do there were these personalized surrogates. What a convenience!

Hensen remembered how he'd argued to convince Lita they should invest in a pair when they married. He'd used all of the sensible modern arguments. "You know as well as I do what having them will save us in terms of time and efficiency. We can send them to all the boring banquets and social functions. They can represent us at weddings and funerals, that sort of thing. After all, it's being done everywhere nowadays. Nobody attends such affairs in person any more if they can afford not to. Why, you see them on the street everywhere. Remember

Kirk, at our reception? Stayed four hours, life of the party and everybody was fooled—you didn't know it was his robot until he told you."

And so forth on and on. "Aren't you sentimental at all darling? If I died wouldn't you like to have my surrogate around to comfort you? I certainly would want yours to share the rest of my life."

Yes he'd used all the practical arguments except the psychotherapeutic one—at that time it had never occurred to him. But perhaps it should have, when he heard her objections.

"I just don't like the idea" Lita had persisted. "Oh it isn't that I'm oldfashioned. But lying there in the forms having every detail of my body duplicated synthetically—ugh! And then they do that awful hypnotherapy or whatever it's called for days to make them think. Oh I know they have no brains it's only a lot of chemicals and electricity but they do duplicate your thought-patterns and they react the same and they *sound* so real. I don't want anyone or anything to know all my secrets—"

Yes that objection should have started him thinking. Lita had secrets even then.

But he'd been too busy to notice; he'd spent his efforts in battering down her objections. And

finally she'd consented.

He remembered the days at the Institute—the tests they'd taken, the time spent in working with the anatomists, the cosmetic department, the sonic and visio adaptors, and then days of hypnotic transference.

Lita was right in a way; it hadn't been pleasant. Even a modern man was bound to feel a certain atavistic fear when confronted for the first time with his completed surrogate. But the finished product was worth it. And after Henson had mastered instructions, learned how to manipulate the robot by virtue of the control-command, he had been almost paternally proud of the creation.

He'd wanted to take his surrogate home with him, but Lita positively drew the line at that.

"We'll leave them both here in Inventory," she said. "If we need them we can always send for them. But I hope we never do."

Henson was finally forced to agree. He and Lita had both given their immobilization commands to the surrogates, and they were placed in their metal cabinets ready to be filed away — "Just like corpses!" Lita had shuddered. "We're looking at ourselves after we're dead."

And that had ended the episode. For a while, Henson made sugges-

tions about using the surrogates — there were occasions he'd have liked to take advantage of a substitute for token public appearances — but Lita continued to object. And so, for two years now, the robots had been on file. Henson paid his taxes and fees on them annually and that was all.

That was all, until lately. Until Lita's unexplained silences and still more inexplicable absences had started Henson thinking. Thinking and worrying. Worrying and watching. Watching and waiting. Waiting to catch her, waiting to kill her —

SO he'd remembered psychotherapy, and gone to his Adjustor. Lucky the man was a friend of his; a friend of both of them, rather. Actually, Lita had known him longer than her husband. But they'd been very close, the three of them, and he knew the Adjustor would understand.

He could trust the Adjustor not to tell Lita. He could trust the Adjustor to have everything ready and waiting for him now.

Henson went up to the office. The papers were ready for him to sign. The two metal boxes containing the surrogates were already placed on the loaders ready for transport to wherever he designated. But the Adjustor wasn't on

hand to greet him.

"Special assignment in Manila," the Second explained to him. "But he left instructions about your case, Mr. Henson. All you have to do is sign the responsibility slips. And of course, you'll be in Monday for the official report."

Henson nodded. Now that the moment was so near at hand he was impatient of details. He could scarcely wait until the micro-dupes were completed and the Register Board signalled clearance. Two common robots were requisitioned to carry the metal cases down to the gyro and load them in. Henson whizzed back home with them and they brought the cases up to his living-level. Then he dismissed them, and he was alone.

He was alone. He could open the cases now. First, his own. He slid back the cover, gazed down at the perfect duplicate of his own body, sleeping peacefully for two serene years since its creation. Henson stared curiously at his pseudo-countenance. He'd aged a bit in two years, but the surrogate was ageless. It could survive the ravages of centuries, and it was always at peace. Always at peace. He almost envied it. The surrogate didn't love, couldn't hate, wouldn't know the gnawing torture of suspicion that led to this shaking, quaking, aching lust to kill —

Henson shoved the lid back and lifted the metal case upright, then dragged it along the wall to a storage cabinet. A domestic-model could have done it for him, but Lita didn't like domestic-models. She wouldn't permit even a common robot in her home.

Lita and her likes and dislikes! Damn her to Los Alamos and gone!

Henson ripped the lid down on the second file.

There she was.

There she was; the beautiful, harlot-eyed, blonde, lying, adorable, dirty, gorgeous, loathsome, heavenly, filthy little goddess of a slut!

He remembered the command word to awake her. It almost choked him now, but he said it.

"Beloved!"

Nothing happened. Then he realized why. He'd been almost snarling. He had to change the pitch of his voice. He tried again, softly. "Beloved!"

She moved. Her breasts rose and fell, rose and fell. She opened her eyes. She held out her arms and smiled. She stood up and came close to him, without a word.

Henson stared at her. She was newly-born and innocent, she had no secrets, she wouldn't betray him. How could he harm her? How

could he harm her when she lifted her face in expectation of a kiss?

But she was Lita. He had to remember that. She was Lita, and Lita was hiding something from him and she must be punished, would be punished.

Suddenly, Henson became conscious of his hands. There was a tingling in his wrists and it ran down through the strong muscles and sinews to the fingers, and the fingers flexed and unflexed with exultant vigour, and then they rose and curled around the surrogate's throat, around Lita's throat, and they were squeezing and squeezing and the surrogate—Lita tried to move away and the scream was almost real and the popping eyes were almost real and the purpling face was almost real, only nothing was real any more except the hands and the choking and the surging sensation of strength.

And then it was over. He dragged the limp, dangling mechanism (it was only a mechanism now, just as the hate was only a memory) to the waste-jet and fed the surrogate to the flame. He turned the aperture wide and thrust the metal case in, too.

Then Henson slept, and he did not dream. For the first time in months he did not dream, because it was over and he was himself again. The therapy was complete.

"SO that's how it was." Henson sat in the Adjustor's office, and the Monday morning sun was strong on his face.

"Good." The Adjustor smiled and ran a hand across the top of his curly head. "And how did you and Lita enjoy your weekend? Fish biting?"

"We didn't fish," said Henson. "We talked."

"Oh?"

"I figured I'd have to tell her what happened, sooner or later. So I did."

"How did she take it?"

"Very well, at first."

"And then —?"

"I asked her some questions."

"Yes."

"She answered them."

"You mean she told you what she'd been hiding?"

"Not willingly. But she told me. After I told her about my own little check-up."

"What was that?"

"I did some calling Friday night. She wasn't in Saigon with her mother."

"No?"

"And you weren't in Manila on a special case, either." Henson leaned forward. "The two of you were together, in New Singapore! I checked it and she admitted it."

The Adjustor sighed. "So now you know," he said.

"Yes. Now I know. Now I know what she's been concealing from me. What you've both been concealing."

"Surely you're not jealous about that?" the Adjustor asked "Not in this modern day and age when—"

"She says she wants to have a child by you," Henson said. "She refused to bear one for me. But she wants yours. She told me so."

"What do you want to do about it?" the Adjustor asked.

"You tell me," Henson murmured. "That's why I've come to you. You're my Adjustor."

"What would you like to do?"

"I'd like to kill you," Henson said. "I'd like to blow off the top of your head with a pocket-blast."

"Not a bad idea." The Adjustor nodded. "I'll have my robot ready whenever you say."

"At my place," said Henson. "Tonight."

"Good enough. I'll send it there to you."

"One thing more." Henson gulped for a moment. "In order for it to do any good, Lita must watch."

It was the Adjustor's turn to gulp, now. "You mean you're going to force her to see you go through with this —?"

"I told her and she agreed," Henson said.

"But, think of the effect on her, man!"

"Think of the effect on me. Do you want me to go mad?"

"No," said the Adjustor "You're right. It's therapy. I'll send the robot around at eight. Do you need a pocket-blast requisition?"

"I have one," said Henson.

"What instructions shall I give my surrogate?" the Adjustor asked.

Henson told him. He was brutally explicit, and midway in his statement the Adjustor looked away, coloring. "So the two of you will be together, just as if *you* were real, and then I'll come in and —"

The Adjustor shuddered a little then managed a smile. "Sound therapy," he said. "If that's the way you want it, that's the way it will be."

THAT'S the way Henson wanted it, and that's the way he had it — up to a point.

He burst into the room around quarter after eight and found the two of them waiting for him. There was Lita, and there was the Adjustor's surrogate. The surrogate had been well-instructed; it looked surprised and startled. Lita needed no instruction; hers was an agony of shame.

Henson had the pocket-blast in his hand, cocked at the ready. He aimed.

Unfortunately, he was just a little late. The surrogate sat up gracefully and slid one hand under the pillow. The hand came up with another pocket-blast aimed and fired all in one motion.

Henson teetered, tottered, and fell. The whole left side of his face sheared away as he went down.

Lita screamed.

Then the surrogate put his arms around her and whispered, "It's all over, darling. All over. We did it! He really thought I was a robot, that I'd go through with his aberrated notion of dramatizing his revenge."

The Adjustor smiled and lifted her face to his. "From now on you and I will always be together. We'll have our child, lots of children if you wish. There's nothing to come between us now."

"But you killed him," Lita whispered. "What will they do to you?"

"Nothing. It was self-defense. Don't forget, I'm an Adjustor. From the moment he came into my office, everything he did or said was recorded during our interviews. The evidence will show that I tried to humor him, that I indicated his mental unbalance and allowed him to work out his own therapy.

"This last interview, today, will not be a part of the record. I've already destroyed it. So as far as the

law is concerned, he had no grounds for jealousy or suspicion. I happened to stop in here to visit this evening and found him trying to kill you — the actual you. And when he turned on me, I blasted him in self-defense."

"Will you get away with it?"

"Of course I'll get away with it. The man was aberrated, and the record will show it."

The Adjustor stood up, "I'm going to call Authority now," he said.

Lita rose and put her hand on his shoulder. "Kiss me first," she whispered. "A real kiss. I like real things."

"Real things," said the Adjustor. She snuggled against him, but he made no move to take her in his arms. He was staring down at Henson.

Lita followed his gaze.

Both of them saw it at the same time, then — both of them saw the torn hole in the left side of Henson's head, and the thin strands of wire protruding from the opening.

"He didn't come," the Adjustor murmured. "He must have suspected, and he sent his robot instead."

Lita began to shake. "You were

to send your robot, but you didn't. He was to come himself, but he sent his robot. Each of you double-crossed the other, and now —"

And now the door opened very quickly.

Henson came into the room.

He looked at his surrogate lying on the floor. He looked at Lita. He looked at the Adjustor. Then he grinned. There was no madness in his grin, only deliberation.

There was deliberation in the way he raised the pocket-blast. He aimed well and carefully, fired only once, but both the Adjustor and Lita crumpled in the burst.

Henson bent over the bodies, inspecting them carefully to make sure that they were real. He was beginning to appreciate Lita's philosophy now. He liked real things.

For that matter, the Adjustor had some good ideas, too. This business of dramatizing aggressions really seemed to work. He didn't feel at all angry or upset any more, just perfectly calm and at peace with the world.

Henson rose, smiled, and walked towards the door. For the first time in years he felt completely adjusted.

SPECIAL YULETIDE OFFER — SEE PAGE 130

For Xmas—and All Year—Give a 'Madge' Subscription

Ellaby's society was a perfect democracy, where all men were equal. But some still wanted more personal attention, and they got it, like—

THE DICTATOR

By

Milton Lesser

JUST looking at Ellaby, you could tell he was going places.

He was five feet nine inches tall and weighed a hundred and fifty pounds. He had an I. Q. of ninety-eight point five-seven, less than four hundredths off the mode. His hair was mousey and worn slightly long for a man, slightly short for a woman. Back in High Falls, where he was born, he was physically weaker than sixty percent of the men but stronger than sixty percent of the women.

He had been in training since his twentieth birthday to assassinate the Dictator. Ellaby was now thirty years old.

Dorcas Sinclair met Ellaby at the pneumo-station. She was too big and strapping for a woman, but otherwise not unattractive with her lusterless hair, slightly thick-featured face, small sagging bosom and heavy-calved legs.

"I'll take your bags," she told Ellaby, and led him from the station. She walked quickly, but not too quickly. You always had to find the happy medium, thought Ellaby. For Ellaby, finding the happy medium had always come easy. Ten years ago, when Ellaby had been graduated from the High Falls secondary school, the four words **MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED** had been printed under his picture in the yearbook. It was expected by everyone: young Ellaby had learned his three R's — rules, rights, responsibilities— satisfactorily. Ellaby had neither excelled nor failed: he was by nature a first class citizen.

Running to keep up with the too big, too long-legged Dorcas Sinclair who was carrying one of his suitcases in each hand, Ellaby was led from the pneumo-station. The splendid, unimaginative geo-



metric precision of the Capitol stretched out before him in the dazzling summer sunlight, the view serving as a leaven for Ellaby's usually phlegmatic disposition. He could feel his spirits rise, his heart thump more rapidly, speeding the sudden flow of adrenalin through his body.

This was the city. It was here where the fruits of whatever had gone wrong in Ellaby's upbringing or whatever had gone wrong in the linear arrangement of his genes would ripen. It was here where Ellaby, modal Ellaby would pass

his tests for top-secret work; unsuspected, average Ellaby, would write his name in flaming letters across the pages of history. It was here where Ellaby would kill the Dictator.

And after that — what? Chaos? A new order based not on modality but something else? Ellaby wasn't sure. No one in the organization knew for sure. The concept was staggering to Ellaby. It was the system — or nothing. Well, let the others worry about it. They did the planning. Ellaby was only the executioner.

THE house was like all the others on the block, all the others in the Capitol, a grimly solid structure of lets-pretend brick fronting on a street which faded into distant haze, straight as a ruled line, to north and south, crossing the east-west avenues at precise right angles every five hundred feet. The grid pattern city, Ellaby remembered from his rights course in school, (every man has the right to a room and bath in any city as long as he is employed) made the best use of available space for houses. The strip city is unnecessary in time of peace — was there ever, had there ever been any other time?; the radial city is preferred for rapid transportation, being the accepted pattern in the great economic hubs and ports like Greater New York and Hampton Roads.

"You will have to live here with me" Dorcas Sinclair told Ellaby, "until you pass your tests for employment. I don't have to tell you how much depends on the outcome of those tests, Ellaby."

"But I can't fail them. I thought you knew my record."

With an unnerving unmodal violence, Dorcas Sinclair's strong fingers dug into the flabby muscle of Ellaby's upper arm. "Well, you had better not," she said, her large teeth hardly parting to let the

sounds out.

Ellaby was suddenly alarmed. He had had very little truck with people of this sort. They were as unpredictable as the weather in High Falls which having a population under twenty-five thousand, had never qualified for weather control. Unlike modal man, they had never been exhaustively studied. Their likes and dislikes were not catered to, but their passions couldn't be predicted, either.

"Ease up, Dorcas," a deep voice said from the doorway leading to the kitchen.

Ellaby stared in that direction gratefully. It was indecent for a woman, for anyone, to expose her emotions that way. Ellaby was almost inclined to thank the stranger.

"Stranger, nothing!" Ellaby blurted aloud. Ellaby's face reddened and he apologized. "I didn't mean to raise my voice," he explained. "You surprised me."

"I guess you didn't expect to find me here, at that. You haven't changed much, Ellaby."

Automatically, Ellaby mumbled his thanks for the compliment. Sam Mulden, though, had changed. He'd always been a radical. He wore his hair cropped too short. He was tall and thin, his elbows and knees exposed by the tunic he wore like knots on gnarled, living wood. Mulden looked older. He

hadn't bothered to dye his graying hair, or to smooth the premature wrinkles on his long-nosed, thin-lipped face. He was smiling sardonically at Ellaby now, as if he could read Ellaby's mind. "I might have known it would be you," he said. "As soon as they said the assassin was coming from High Falls, I should have guessed."

"Why?" asked Ellaby. It was a question which had nudged for ten years at his docile patience. When people go out of their way to train you, though, to spend ten years teaching you every inch of Capitol territory without once taking you there, to make you proficient with various deadly weapons although your reflexes are splendidly modal, to teach you meaningless phrases like democratic inequality (?) and individuality (?) and the right to live a self-directed (?) life, to make your own decisions (?), when people act, in short, like a very thorough government school, even if their motives seem strangely misdirected, you don't question them.

"For two reasons," Mulden said. "You can understand the first, Ellaby. If the second one bothers you, forget it. In the first place, you're so perfectly modal, the government would never suspect you. In the second place, you're so well adjusted you're bound to follow our instructions."

"Or any instructions," Dorcas Sinclair said. "That's what I'm afraid of, Mulden."

ELLABY still couldn't get over it. He never expected to find poor, unfortunate Sam Mulden in such a high position in the organization or anywhere. He remembered Mulden clearly from their school days together. Mulden was a character, a real character. Physically, he was barely acceptable: more than eighty percent of the men and some sixty-five percent of the women were able to knock Mulden down in the High Falls gymnasium classes. But mentally Mulden was a misfit. His I. Q. was in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifty. His gangling, ineffectual physique wasn't too far below the mode, but mentally he soared intolerably above it.

Now Mulden told Dorcas Sinclair, "Don't worry about that. We've had ten years to work on him. They can't undo it in a few days. Ellaby, you are quite sure you know what you must do?"

"Oh, yes. Tomorrow morning I will take my security tests. According to the record of my previous physical and mental testing, I should make top secret classification. I will work here in the capitol. I will find the Dictator and kill him. The only thing that bothers

me is I don't know who to look for. What does the Dictator look like?"

"Didn't they explain all of that to you in High Falls?" the woman asked irritably, without even making an effort to poker her face.

"Ease off," Mulden told her for the second time. "He's confused. Listen to me, Ellaby. Don't you remember? The Dictator never makes public appearances."

"Yes. Yes, now I remember. No one knows what the Dictator looks like. He keeps to himself. He issues orders which are instantly obeyed, helping to maintain universal modality in the country. It almost seems a shame I'll have to kill him."

"So we've pavloved him for ten years, have we?" Dorcas Sinclair raged. Ellaby turned away in embarrassment. "Damn you, Mulden, he still questions it!"

"He's supposed to," Mulden explained quietly. "If he accepted what we told him, he'd go around talking about it naively. This way, he understands the necessity for secrecy."

"He doesn't understand —"

"Well, then he realizes it. Let him get some sleep, will you? Tomorrow's going to be a good day for us, a big day for him. Good night, Ellaby. If you want anything, Sinclair will get it for you."

Ellaby assured them he would want nothing except a simple meal of whatever most people in the Capitol ate on Wednesdays. It turned out to be pork chops, which Ellaby neither particularly liked nor disliked. He chewed his food with the proper lack of enthusiasm and retired early.

THE next morning, Ellaby took his I. Q. test at the Capitol personnel bureau. He was slightly above average in space perception but slightly below average in comparisons. He hoped his anxiety didn't show on his face. If anyone asked him why he had come to the Capitol he was ready to blurt out the reason and have done with it. He wondered what Sam Mulden would have thought if he knew. The Sinclair woman would have been furious.

No one asked Ellaby. You came to the Capitol because you wanted to work there. According to the mode, a man desired to change his location every 3.7 years. Ellaby had been 6.3 years tardy, but High Falls was an ideally modal community in which people tended to linger.

"I. Q., point seven under the mode," the personnel clerk told Ellaby. The slight variation — due to his anxiety — was not enough to matter, Ellaby realized with a

faint sense of triumph. "Proceed to physical testing," the girl told Ellaby.

Obediently, Ellaby followed the green arrow to the gymnasium. He was given a locker, a towel, a pair of athletic shorts and a first-aid kit. He stripped off his clothing, placing the tunic, underwear and sandals in the locker, then climbed into his athletic shorts and fell in-line with the other men and women carrying their towels and first-aid kits into the gymnasium.

The ten-over-mode male wrestling tester pinned Ellaby in less than two minutes, a fact which was duly noted on his employment blank. He was given fifteen minutes of rest, then squared off on the mat with a skinny, five-under-mode male. Ellaby bested him in four minutes flat, took another fifteen minute break, mopping the sweat from his body with an already sodden towel, then defeated the ten-under-mode female wrestler in two minutes and some seconds. It developed into a knock down, drag out fight with the two-over-mode female, who finally forced Ellaby's shoulders to the mat for the necessary five seconds after half an hour.

Ellaby showered, ate a hot Thursday lunch and took his employment blank to the emotion lab. His electroencephalogram revealed

nine alpha cycles to the second, but too much theta.

"Are you nervous?" the technician asked Ellaby. "You're theta-ing all over the place."

"I guess so. Yes, I'm nervous."

"Then let's try it again."

They did, the technician rubbing the greasy electrode salve on Ellaby's forehead before the electrodes were fastened there for the second time. The result was the same. "More than modal theta," said the technician, writing something in code on his employment blank. "See the personnel advisor, please."

For Ellaby, it came as a distinct shock. His heart pounded against his temples, in his ears. He was emotionally unstable. Had the ten years been for nothing?

"**S**IT down, Ellaby," the personnel advisor said. He was a man of middle age, irritatingly careless about his appearance. He had dyed his graying hair, of course, but if you looked close you could see gray at the roots. He wore a green Thursday tunic which was poorly starched. Having had a full week to get it ready, that was naturally inexcusable.

"You have a splendid record, Ellaby," the sloppy personnel clerk said. "Mentally, within tenths of the mode. Physically, even closer. Unfortunately your emo-

tional —”

“That never happened to me before, not in High Falls, it didn’t,” Ellaby interrupted.

“This is not High Falls. Every community, you must realize, has its own security testing center. And the capitol requires the tightest security of all.”

“I know but I was nervous. You’re going to tell me my theta was too high, aren’t you?”

“That’s correct. You needn’t feel so bad about it. You’re going to be cleared for secret work. You’re damn close to modal, Ellaby. You’re a good security risk. Incidentally, just why were you nervous?”

“Because I wanted top secret clearance. Because I wanted to work close to the Dictator. You see —” Abruptly, Ellaby stopped talking, clasping a hand over his mouth in sudden confusion. He wasn’t supposed to talk about this. Lying, of course, was as far from Ellaby’s nature as it was from anyone else’s, assuming he were reasonably close to the mode. But Ellaby hadn’t been asked for all that information directly. “What kind of job will I get?” he asked, trying desperately to change the subject.

It was too late. The personnel clerk asked, “Just why did you want to work close to the Dicta-

tor?”

Ellaby felt a single drop of sweat fall from his armpit under the loose tunic and roll, itching, down the side of his body. He wanted with all his soul to be back in High Falls. Anyplace but here.

“Why, Ellaby?”

“I can’t answer that question. A man isn’t forced to answer a question unless he wants to.”

“Certainly not,” said the personnel advisor, staring blandly at Ellaby. “This is a democratic country.”

“Then —”

“But you’ve never known a man to refuse answering a question asked of him officially, have you?”

“I’m not sure I understand, sir.”

“You don’t have to be so obsequious, Ellaby. I’m less modal than you are, but I make the best of my divergencies. What I meant was this: did you ever hear of a criminal *not* confessing to his crime?”

“Well, no.”

“I’ll ask you the question again, Ellaby. Why did you want to work near the Dictator?”

The man leaned close, peered at Ellaby. The room was small, almost a cubicle, the bare walls seeming to close in on all four sides. Ellaby stifled a wild impulse to scream and run out of there, run any place as long as he could leave

the room and the personnel advisor behind him. "I'm sorry, but I can't answer that question," he said finally.

"Tell me, Ellaby, did you ever hear your own voice?"

What a strange question. "Why, certainly. All the time, when I speak."

"No, I mean your voice reproduced artificially. Your radio voice?"

"No, I never heard it."

"Well, you're about to."

While the personnel advisor busied himself setting up the radio equipment, Ellaby had a few seconds in which to think. He could still make a clean breast of the whole thing. They had chosen him — Mulden, the Sinclair woman and the others in High Falls — for his modality. Very well, he could use that modality to get out from under. He didn't understand. He didn't know what they were leading him to, slowly, over a period of ten years. He didn't want to assassinate the Dictator. What in the world would he want to do that for? He would gladly name all the names he knew if the personnel advisor would only let him forget the whole mad experience and return to High Falls. He could attend Adjustment Academy if they thought he needed it. Anything. Anything

"Please slip these earphones over your head, over your ears. There. Is the microphone close enough to your lips? I think so."

A metal band running over the top of Ellaby's cranium held the earphones in place. Another metal band curved around the side of his cheek and chin, leading to a small microphone before his lips.

"Place your hands on the arms of your chair, please."

Ellaby did as he was told. *Click! Click!* A pair of manacles sprang up from the chair arms trapping Ellaby's wrists. Ellaby looked at the personnel tester in unpokered alarm. "What did you do that for?" he asked timidly.

"So you won't remove the earphones. Now, are we ready?" The personnel advisor pressed a button on his desk. Ellaby thought he heard a faint hum of power in the microphone. "I will ask you once more, Ellaby. Why did you want to work near the Dictator?"

Ellaby shrugged. He was going to say, "I'm sorry, but I don't have to answer that question." He said, and heard through the earphones: "I'm sorry (I'm) but I (sorry) don't have (but) to answer (I) wer that (don't) question (have to answer that question)."

"Again, please. I didn't hear you," the personnel tester said.

It was his own voice Ellaby had heard through the earphones. Playback, with a fraction of a second lapse. Oddly, it un-nerved him. The reproduced voice had no right lagging. He shouted, "I'm sorry (I'm) 'but I (sorry) don't have (but) to ans (I) wer that (don't question! (have to) Shut up! (answer) SHUT UP! (that) PLEASE . . . (question). P L E A S E! (please)."

"Once more, if you don't mind."

Ellaby's head was whirling. He blinked sweat from his eyes. "I — please! (I — please!)"

"The law requires that you make some answer, even if answer is a refusal."

Criminals confessed, Ellaby thought wildly. Is this why criminals confessed? Did the sound of their own voices drive them mad? It seemed such a simple device, and yet . . . and yet . . . but he could fool it. He couldn't rush the words out in a quick torrent and: "I don't have to (I don't answer that ques (have to) tion (answer that question.)" Ellaby — and Ellaby's echo. "Well, I (well) don't (I don't)!" Ellaby blinked more sweat from his eyes. "Mumble (mumble). Sob. (Sob)."

"Relax, Ellaby. You seem upset. Will you read this, please?" the personnel advisor held a card in front of Ellaby's face.

The words swam, blurred together, fused, were readable and then were not. Ellaby read aloud: "A code (a) of eth (code) ics for (eth) mankind (ethics for mankind)." It was, he realized, the preamble to the constitution. "In the (in) nineteenth (the) centur (nine) y the (nine) common (teenth)" — faster, faster! — "(century the common)c-common man was defended (common man) by enlightened liberalism (man was). In the t-twentieth century (in the t-twen) common man was championed by (tieth century) enlightened liberalism (the common man was). In the twenty-first century (championed by enlightened) the common man assumed his proper place (liberalism) at the top of society but (in the twenty-first cen) will protect the rights of the (tury the common man) enlightened liberals or any other minority, (assumed his proper) encouraging them to become (place at the top of) as common as possible (society but will protect the rights of the enlightened liberals or any other minority, encouraging them to become as common as possible).

"Oh God (Oh)," shouted Ellaby. "Shut (God) it (shut) off (it) make (off) it (make) stop (it) God (stop — God)!"

"Will you agree to answer my question?"

"Anything (anything)! ANYTHING (anything)." Now the playback was a faint whisper. Ellaby found himself hysterically fascinated by it, trying to guess the time-lapse, which varied, trying to guess the volume, which varied. Ellaby's head slumped forward on his chest. The unfamiliar wetness at the corners of his mouth was drool. Ellaby didn't quite know it, of course, but he had given himself a very mild and very temporary nervous breakdown.

Two hours later he was asked one question. He answered: "I want to be near the Dictator so I can kill him."

LATER, Dorcas Sinclair asked: "What else happened at testing, Ellaby?"

"Take your time," Mulden cautioned. "He looks nervous."

"I know it. I want to find out why."

"After my EEG," said Ellaby softly, "they told me I had too much theta."

"Damn you!" Dorcas Sinclair swore. "Then you weren't cleared for top secret?"

"No, I wasn't. Not at first. Then a strange thing happened. They said I was cleared only for secret and asked me why I wanted to be cleared for top secret."

"You fool!" the woman cried.

"I told them it was because I wanted to work near the Dictator. I didn't mean to tell them, but —"

The woman shook her head in despair. "Don't bother finishing," she said. "You can clear out of here, Ellaby. You're through. Ten years. Ten years wasted."

"If you wish," Ellaby said mildly. "But you're missing the most interesting part. They asked me why I wanted to be near the Dictator."

Dorcas Sinclair sucked in her breath sharply. Even Mulden seemed anxious. "You didn't tell them?" the woman asked in a frantic whisper.

"I'm afraid I did."

"We'll have to flee the city," the woman told Mulden, ignoring Ellaby now. "If he told them that, he probably named names. I have friends in Hampton Roads —"

"Let him finish," Mulden said. Mulden was looking strangely at Ellaby.

"They didn't ask me to name anyone in the conspiracy," Ellaby said. "Unless they could poker very well, they seemed perfectly calm. They said they would make an exception in my case. They would clear me for top secret work. I start tomorrow."

"What's your job?" Mulden asked eagerly.

"Well, this is the strangest part.

I'm to be the Dictator's confidential assistant."

"Of course!" Mulden cried. "It makes sense. Don't you see, Sinclair? We're not the only ones. There are others, inside the government, who think it's time for a *coup*. With their help, Ellaby won't fail us."

Dorcas Sinclair wasn't convinced. "Doesn't it seem peculiar to you that, purely by co-incidence, Ellaby happened to meet these people?"

But Mulden shrugged. "You know the old saw about the gift horse," he said. "Ellaby will go ahead with the plan. Tomorrow, if all goes well, we'll have a full-scale revolution on our hands. Don't you understand, Sinclair? The Dictator — a figurehead. There are plenty of people around like us, who don't want to do things just because everyone else does them, who don't want to be stamped by the mold of conformity, who don't want . . . but I don't have to go on. The Dictator is a figurehead, a symbol of power. Destroy him and the whole conforming system comes tumbling down in chaos. You'll see tomorrow."

It was all beyond Ellaby, who was still weary from the playback ordeals. He took the small, palm-sized blaster from Mulden and slip-

ped it into his tunic. Tomorrow he would assassinate the Dictator and suffer the consequences. He almost had in mind to rebel. The people at testing had been very nice — except for those earphones. But the Sinclair woman and Mulden might be able to do as bad — or worse. He'd go through with it.

Under the circumstances, he slept surprisingly well.

MULDEN'S passionate parting words still ringing in his ears, Ellaby entered the capitol building. "Someday you and your kind will understand, Ellaby," Mulden had said. "Someday you'll know what banal really means, and vulgar. Someday — I promise you, someday — the true social perspective will be re-established. it should not be the role in life of the common man, the mass, the mob, to make the uncommon man as common as possible, but quite the other way around. The other way, Ellaby! Common folk should be given the opportunity to become as uncommon as possible. Otherwise, Ellaby, we've reached a dead end.

"Kill him and I promised you this: the whole warped system will come tumbling. A man shouldn't be forced to conform, Ellaby. Mankind's greatness stems from lack of conformity. For his own purposes, the Dictator bows to the will of the

mob. But he's surrounded himself, with mediocrity. Without him, what can they do? Without him they'll go down in weeks, Ellaby. In days!"

The guard, a tall blonde woman who looked like a twenty-over-mode to Ellaby, led him down a long, well-lit corridor. No one had searched him. It would have taken the guard a moment to reach within his tunic, find the blaster and drag him off to the Academy. Other people, nameless people on nameless errands, walked by in the corridor without paying Ellaby any attention.

Was Mulden right? Were there people here, within the building, waiting to help Ellaby?

Ellaby licked his dry lips and kept walking, finding it difficult to keep his legs from trembling. It was as if a nimbus of terror dogged his footsteps, ready to envelope him momentarily. The guard seemed completely unconcerned. She was humming the melody of the latest song-hit, a wonderfully liltingly banal tune which had been on everyone's lips back in High Falls.

The blonde guard paused before a door in the long corridor. "Here we are," she said.

Ellaby opened his mouth to speak, but gulped in air instead. He felt a weak fluttering in his chest. He had never been so afraid

in all his life.

The guard, who was a head taller than Ellaby, glanced down at him. "You don't have to be so nervous," she said in a perfectly normal voice. "Everything's going to be all right."

"You see, it's a new job and all —"

"Oh, here! Let's see that blaster."

Ellaby's heart plunged. He wanted to bolt, to run. She knew. She knew . . .

He stood there, too weak to move, while the guard reached inside his tunic, found the blaster taped to his chest, wrenched it loose. She took it out, held it up, flipping open the chamber and examined the inside. "All right," she said. "I only wanted to make sure it was loaded."

And she took out a key and opened the door. "He's inside," she said, and strolled on down the hall.

ELLABY clutched the doorframe for support. He was breathing raggedly now, as if he'd run all the great length of the corridor, sprinting with monsters behind him. He rubbed the shoulder of his tunic against his damp brow and entered the room.

A man Ellaby's own size was sitting there, viewing a 3D. When he heard Ellaby at the door he got up. He looked very unhappy as Ellaby

pointed the blaster at him. He said, "So soon?"

"They said you would try wiles, trickery, deceit," Ellaby recited. "You won't fool me."

"You think I'm the Dictator? You're going to kill me? That's very funny. I know, you see. I know."

"Stand back!" Ellaby screamed.

"I assure you, I am not the Dictator any more than you will be—"

The Dictator's face dissolved in a red, jelly-like smear as Ellaby pulled this trigger of his blaster.

He spent the next ten minutes being very ill.

Afterwards, they were very efficient. They carted the body away and told Ellaby all he had to do was ring for food or drink or anything he wanted. Occasionally, he would sign some papers. Occassion-

ally — masked — he might be asked to review a parade.

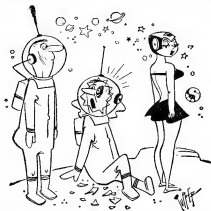
And all at once, sitting alone in the room with its pleasant view, it came to Ellaby. He passed no judgment, but he understood — and he was afraid.

The masses ruled, thought Ellaby, hardly knowing what the phrase meant. The system was self-perpetuating, and revolution couldn't change it. The common man — men like Ellaby — had come into his own, for once and for all time.

The man Ellaby had slain was no Dictator. He had tried to tell Ellaby that before he perished. Now Ellaby had taken his place. Ellaby was no Dictator, either.

But he would do until the next one came along.

THE END



"I thought you said they wouldn't understand English!"



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"My hiccups are all gone!"

Alice knew that Dobie was a good dog, even if he did have an alarming habit of hunting down rabbits and gophers. But one day he brought her—

THE HAND

by

Jerry Sohl

ALICE McNearby was washing breakfast dishes and looking out the kitchen window at the November sky when she first spied Dobie. The way he was sneaking up to the house she knew he had killed something.

She dried her hands on her apron and tried to put down the suspicion that gnawed at the edge of her mind as she went to the door. During the past month Dobie had killed a cat, a pheasant, two rabbits and a field mouse and it seemed it would be only a question of time until he got one of the chickens or even one of the suckling pigs. That would be all Mac would need to throw one of his wild spells and he'd probably take a gun to Dobie as he had threatened to do. To make it worse, Dobie seemed to know how Mac felt and often growled at him. Mac didn't

growl back but the look in her husband's eyes was enough to convince her Dobie's continued existence was in doubt.

It was a wonder to Alice that Mac hadn't done away with him already, judging from the comfort she derived from the dog. Dobie never fretted, never whined and seemed so appreciative of everything she did for him. She had scolded him for his killing but found herself unable to put her heart in it because he seemed to love it so. Instead, she always managed to clear any bones away before Mac returned from town or came up from the barn and she was thankful he seemed as yet unaware of the brown dog's hunting nature.

Now it appeared she'd have to cover up for the dog once again and she opened the door. Dobie was under a bush half way across the barn yard, his kill still in his



mouth. He was circling around, and she knew he'd soon be on his stomach enjoying his feast.

"Dobie!" she called in a low voice, hoping it would not carry to the barn.

Dobie's ears came up. He looked her way.

"Dobie! . . . Come here, Dobie!"

The dog was undecided, looking at her, unmoving for a moment. Then his tail started flicking, he lowered his head and came up to her.

Then she saw what he had in his

mouth and her blood stopped and only a great effort on the part of her heart started it going again.

It was a human hand, blood still oozing from the severed wrist.

"Dobie!"

The way she said it, the way she looked—something made the dog drop the hand. It fell to the ground, limp, palm down.

Dobie, head hung, tail down, ventured forward, nuzzled her hand. But Alice could not tear her eyes from the thing on the cold ground. She had cared for Dobie

like a baby ever since someone dropped him off out in the country and she had adopted the name Dobie because a passing child had called him that and it seemed like a good name . . . and she loved him.

But this, this hand. That was too much.

She looked around, saw a milk pail, put it open end down over the hand and carried two large rocks from the garden border to put on top to secure it. She didn't want it to be gone when she brought Mac back to see it.

She heard her ring on the telephone—rather early for Mrs. Swearingen or Mrs. Abbey wasn't it?—but ignored it. There was something else she had to do and do quickly. For the first time in months she felt thankful for Mac's presence. Surely he would know what to do. Though it was cold, she was unmindful of the fact that she did not wear a coat as she hurried to the barn; she was thinking instead that perhaps she should have answered the phone in case it might have been someone other than her women friends, possibly something in connection with the severed hand. She shuddered as she remembered how it had looked.

Alice found Mac in the loft. He had a forkful of hay over the opening when he saw her below. He stopped, narrowed his eyes before

he slowly brought the hay back to the loft floor and leaned on the pitchfork.

"Dobie's found something," she said and wished her voice hadn't quavered so.

Mac spat a blob of tobacco on the floor above her. "He's a no-good dog," he said. "Scares the pigs. Always sneakin' around. Ought to be rid of him. Should have got 'round to it before this. What did he find?"

"A hand." She swallowed . . . and shivered.

"A what?"

"A hand. A human hand." She suddenly took pride in the fact that she was telling him something he didn't know and that he was interested. "I don't know where he got it."

Mac put down the fork and lowered his burly frame over the edge of the opening and came down the ladder without a word. He followed her up to the house and she was thankful Dobie was nowhere around. When he kicked over the pail she was gratified to hear his sharp intake of breath.

"By God!" he said, staring down at it. Then he flicked it over with his boot. "By God!" he said again. Alice had never seen him so agitated.

He turned to her, his eyes narrower than she had ever seen them.

"You take a good look at it?"

She nodded, looked down at the way the fingers were bent upward as if the hand were holding an invisible ball. She heard Mac spit, looked at him running his fingers along his stubbled jaw.

"It ain't human," he said. "Anybody with any sense could see that. It's got six fingers."

JUST then the phone rang again. It seemed to come from a long way off and Alice hadn't consciously noticed it until her husband said. "Ain't you goin' to answer the phone?" And then she went to the door, dazed and wondering. She turned before she went in.

"What are you going to do with it?" she asked.

"You just go in and gab with those women folks," he said. "I'll take care of it."

"Shouldn't we call the sheriff?"

His eyes came up level with hers. "We ain't goin' to call nobody. I don't want no trouble. And don't you go talkin' about it with *them* either."

The phone was Mrs. Swearingen who told her that she had been trying to get her for the last half hour ever since she heard about that ship that crashed and wasn't it awful and that a person wasn't safe in his bed asleep any more with these planes flying around and

crashing—and so far from an airport, too. Mrs. Swearingen was surprised that Alice had noticed no smoke and didn't she know the wreck was closer to the McNearby place than it was to the Swearingens?

"It's right south of your lower forty on the old Carnahan land, Alice. I'd figure it at about a mile from your place. Lots of people down there."

And then there was the call from Mrs. Abbey who told her she'd come from the crash site and wasn't it a peculiar plane with those funny windows and that once-broken-one somebody had patched up from the inside.

"The sheriff won't let anybody go near it," Mrs. Abbey said. "He says it's a space ship and the army ought to have a look at it first. But I saw him trying to find where to get in. Except for that broken window and that crumpled nose it don't look too bad off. Big clouds of smoke were shooting out the tail when I first got there but it's not smoking any more. Really, you ought to go down and see it, Alice."

Alice told her husband about it. He had gone back to the barn and she didn't see the severed hand anywhere on the way there.

"So that's where it come from," he said. "Good thing it didn't land

on my place." He spat and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his overalls. It always bothered Alice when he did this because the stain was so difficult to get out but she had long ceased trying to change him "If it'd landed here I'd of blown it up like a stump."

"Shouldn't we go down and see it?" Alice asked, knowing too late she had phrased the question the wrong way.

"Curiosity killed the cat," he said, and there was the faintest glimmer of a smile on his face but it was only fleeting. "Let everybody else go down and I'll get my work done while they're standin' around with their mouths hangin' open. I'm runnin' a farm and I aim to run it right."

"I think I'll go down." She tried to make it have resolve but didn't quite succeed.

He glared at her and spat again. "Then git," he said. He threw down a large forkful of hay and she had to jump out of the way. She went right after dinner.

She saw a silver cylinder that looked ever so much like pictures of guided missiles she had seen in the newspapers except that this one was bigger than any of them. Its nose was dug she could not tell how far into the earth and some of the metal on the sides was battered and bent and the tail was she

guessed about a hundred and fifty feet in the air. It was about twenty-five feet across.

There were clusters of people about and she recognized many of them she hadn't seen for a long time and she was glad she had come because it gave her a rare chance to visit; Mac seldom cared for just visiting. She talked to the Blaines, the Purveses, to the Gordon children whose parents had let them remain at the wreck site even after they had gone home for chores, to the Barfords and Hocholters and many others. They asked about Mac and she offered her usual excuses for him.

While she was there she saw an army car driven up. She watched while some men got out and went through the roped-off area and pounded and scraped on the cylinder and then stood off looking at the tail of it, scratching their heads.

WHEN she went home she was surprised to see how far the sun had moved across the sky and hoped Mac wouldn't be upset by her prolonged absence. She was gratified to see that he wasn't in the house. She petted Dobie for a while before she went in to stir up the stove and prepare supper.

During the meal Alice tried to tell her husband something of what

she had seen at the wreck site but if he paid any attention to her he didn't reveal it. He had propped up a farm equipment catalogue against the sugar bowl and studied the pages without saying a word. She resigned herself to eating in silence with this great hulk of a man before her and reflected that this night was no different from most of the others. She wondered what it was that made him the way he was, so intent on his farm to the exclusion of everything else, including humanity. It was a fetish, an obsession that didn't pay off because she couldn't see that they were better off than the Swearings or the Abbeys or any of the others in the neighborhood.

When he was through he simply got up, put on his overcoat and went outside. In a few minutes she could hear the car start and knew it would be another lonely evening. Mac would be home when he felt like it, reeking of liquor but handling it well. She did not begrudge him these absences because the man obviously needed something to take his mind off his work. But she wished she had some comparable escape.

She had got out her writing board, had settled herself comfortably with pen in hand in Mac's big chair and had even put the date on the letter to her mother who lived

in Canada when she heard Dobie's excited bark.

She picked up a shawl on the way to the kitchen, turned on the big light on the windmill and looked out the window. Dobie was in the middle of the yard barking at something she couldn't see. She went out.

"Dobie," she called. "What is it?"

The dog whined and moved about nervously, looking first at her and then at the darkness between the big barn and the machine shed. As she sought to pierce the blackness there, a shape moved out from between the buildings and the sudden move caused her to step back. Dobie at once set up loud and ferocious barking.

"Quiet, Dobie," she managed to say, laying a hand aside the dog's head and viewing the figure before her. It was a man—at least a man *shape*—with hands (she thanked God the creature had both its hands), a head, neck, shoulders and legs. But the head was a lot larger than a man's, there was no hair on it and the eyes were smaller, the nose longer and the mouth a narrow slash across the face. The neck was short, the shoulders thin and the legs and arms were spindling. She saw that each hand had six fingers. Across the narrow shoulders had been flung what

looked like a carpet and from beneath this fell a skirt that went to the knees, held to the body with a metal rope belt just under his ribs. The shoes were enormous things for such pipestem legs—until she saw they were soft and furry and that this gave them their size. For a moment she almost laughed because he presented such a grotesque figure, but she did not dare. The creature spoke.

"Good evening, Mrs. McNearby," it said in a not unpleasant, whistling voice and Alice wondered how it could talk so well to her.

"I come from the crashed ship. You know of it, of course. You were there this afternoon."

Alice was on the point of asking how he knew she had been at the wreck site when he started in again.

"We have traced the severed hand of one of our crew to your place here. We came down at considerable velocity when our ship went out of control. We were lucky to escape with our lives. But one of us was thrown from the ship with such force that his hand was cut off by an obstruction on the ship. Your dog happened on the scene before we could find the hand."

The chill of the November night air was beginning to penetrate her shawl and Alice could feel a stirring of air on her legs. Dobie

moved restlessly at her side but she did not let go of his neck hair for fear of what he might do.

"We need that hand, Mrs. McNearby. Without it the man who lost it will be at a tragic disadvantage among us. That is why we were looking so hard for it this morning after the crash. If we can return the hand to him in time it can, through proper treatment, be made as good as new. Would you be so good as to return it to me, now, please?"

The eyes, though tiny, seemed not unkind, and the alien stood silent. She was moved by his pleas.

"Mac—that's my husband—has it," Alice said. "I saw Dobie here with it and put it under a milk pail and when Mac saw it he said he'd take care of it." She hoped she was making sense.

"Do you know where it is?"

"I don't know where Mac put it."

"Would you find it for me, please? I'll wait."

ALICE agreed and, wondering what Mac would say if he came home and found the hand gone, started looking for it. But surely Mac would understand about the hand, she thought. I'll explain to him the urgency of it, that one of the aliens needs it to

live and be useful.

She looked in the obvious places, in the storeroom just off the kitchen, in the cellar, then in the house itself, in Mac's room and through his things, and even in the attic, though she knew it couldn't be there. She became frantic then, paced by the alien's necessity for his hand, and did not bother to straighten things up after she looked. It simply couldn't be in the house. But where else? She went out and told the alien she could not find it but that she would look in the barn.

In the end she could find it nowhere and when she told the alien he seemed as disappointed as she.

"I have seen you searching," he said. "I want to thank you for your trouble."

"I'm awfully sorry," she said. "I don't know where Mac could have hid it. When he comes home I'll ask him."

"I'll wait for him," the alien said. "It's imperative we have the hand. It is the only thing standing in the way of our leaving your planet. Your husband will know where it is and return it to us."

"I'm sure he will," she said, hoping she was right but knowing how stubborn Mac could be. Then she got to worrying about what would happen if he would refuse and as she went back to the house with

Dobie at her side she was overcome with the shakes.

She did not get her composure back until she had drunk a cup of steaming hot coffee. Then she looked at the clock, saw it was eleven and that she had spent nearly two hours looking for the hand. She saw, too, that the figure was still in the yard, standing there motionless, like something carved out of stone.

Her husband drove in at midnight and it seemed an eternity between the time the engine stopped and he entered the house.

From the way he looked at her he was surprised to find her still in the kitchen.

"You still up?" His face was flushed, his tongue thick.

"Mac," she said, not knowing how to begin. "Where is that hand?"

"You still worried about that?" He took off his coat and threw it on the table.

"But Mac! They've come after it."

He looked at her dully. "Who's come after it?"

"The aliens—from the ship. There's one of them in the yard. Look out the window."

He turned around and saw the stationary figure in the yard. He took a deep breath. "So that's one of 'em, eh?" He laughed in a way

that chilled her, then went to the cupboard and reached for his shotgun on the wall next to it.

Alice put her hand on his shoulders and he stopped before he touched the gun.

"Listen, Mac. They need that hand. It belongs to one of their men and they need it because they're going to put it back on and it will be as good as new. Then they're going to leave."

He looked down at her with bloodshot, narrow eyes and she could see where tobacco had run out of the corner of his mouth and the only thing she could think of was what it would look like on the overalls when she'd wash them.

"That thing out there," Mac said, "ain't got no business 'round here scarin' the pigs and chickens. And I aim to get it."

"I wish you had told me where the hand is," Alice said, her eyes scalded with tears. "I tried to find it. I looked everywhere. If I had found it I would have given it to him and now they'd be gone."

He shoved her from him rudely. "Jest like a woman to do a thing like that. And without even askin' me." He was breathing hard and he moved to the window to look at the alien again. "You, out there. You want that hand, eh?" He laughed again, then turned to her. "You looked for it. That's

what you said. Well, you jest looked in the wrong place. I hid it good." He went over to his coat and withdrew a newspaper-wrapped package from one of the pockets. He unfolded it on the table. It was the hand.

"Please take it out to him, Mac," Alice said. "He's waiting for it."

His face was sour and his lips a sneer. "Give it to him, hell," he said. "Dobie brought it here, didn't he? I've a mind to let Dobie have it."

"No, No!"

Mac put his hands on the table, stared down at the hand and shook his head. "But Dobie don't deserve it."

He picked up the hand and a queasiness prevented Alice from looking directly at it.

"It's a matter of time," she pleaded. "Please take it to them. They've got to have it right away or they can't use it. She heard the clink of one of the stove lids and watched in horror as Mac dropped the hand through the hole into the fire beneath. She was suddenly sick. During it all she could hear was Mac's laughter.

"Git on upstairs," he said a few minutes later. "Git on up to bed."

ALICE looked at him, knowing her face was pale and her eyes

wet and hating him for what he had done to her and what he had done to the aliens. But she felt fear, too, because she had never seen him quite like this.

"What are you going to do?"

He went over, took down a box of shells from the cupboard. "What d'you suppose? I'm goin' to run that thing off my place."

"You can't do that!"

"You wait and see."

"But he's done nothing to you!"

"He's on my property, ain't he? Now you get on upstairs like I told you. Git!"

Alice went up the stairs engulfed by a feeling of sorrow for the aliens, particularly for the one that would never get his hand back, and filled with fury for her husband.

From her bedroom window she could see the alien still standing in the yard and she wondered what he would think of them for burning the hand and for what Mac was about to do.

She stood there a long time before the alien moved. She heard the downstairs door open and close and she knew Mac was outside and that the two were approaching each other. The alien finally moved from her field of vision.

Listening, she heard the alien's calm, whistling voice but she could not make out what he said.

She could only hear the raving of her husband and this she did not want to hear.

When the shotgun blast came she jumped as if she herself had been hit and once again she was flooded with compassion for the creature from another world somewhere who had come in friendship and who had been given something hateful in return.

She went to the window but she could see nothing. She did not dare go downstairs again with Mac in the mood he was in. She sat in an armchair at the window looking out into the barn lot illuminated by the lone electric light high in the windmill. And eventually, she did not know when, she fell asleep.

When she woke up the day was just dawning and with a rush she remembered everything that had happened the night before and she found she had slept through the night in the chair without removing her clothes. When she stood up, her muscles screamed protestingly. She looked out into the yard and saw that the light in the windmill was still burning.

She went to Mac's bedroom, expecting to find him sprawled out across his bed. But his bed had not been slept in. Downstairs she expected to find him, head in hands, asleep at the kitchen table. But he was not there and the shot-

gun was not in its place on the wall.

She found the gun on the doorstep. But Mac wasn't in sight. Dobie came up to her and nuzzled her hands.

"Where is he Dobie?" she asked. "Where's Mac?"

Dobie turned and trotted be-

fore her, looking back at her as if to say, "This is the way."

She found Mac behind the barn.

He was alive, but in a state of shock, moaning in pain and fear.

His right hand was missing. Severed neatly at the wrist.

THE END.

★ *Physics Is A Madhouse!* ★

ONCE upon a time in the dear, dead days of fifteen years ago, the science of nuclear physics (it was called atomic physics then!) was simple and understandable. Even physicists felt they had discovered their building blocks and that all that remained was to put them together. The scientists had electrons, protons, photons and neutrons to worry about. It was all so simple.

But the picture has changed a lot since then and while tremendous practical advances have been made, the confusion is much worse than before. Now physics worries about 20 fundamental particles where it once had four! There are neutrinos, electrons, positrons, positive mu mesons, negative mu mesons, kappa mesons, protons, antiprotons, neutrons, antineutrons, gravitons, mesons—the list seems endless!

The nice clear Bohr picture of the atom (which today's illustrators are very fond of) with its little electrons spinning in elliptical orbits around a simple nucleus is gone. So much is happening within the atom, that any simple picture is impossi-

ble to present. At present only the weird abstruse complexities of mathematical wave mechanics can describe such a thing, and unfortunately most of us can't understand it. For that matter even the physicists have no vivid picture themselves. It's as if they plug in numbers—and numbers come out.

Actually the situation of course is not that bad. But what the science of nuclear physics needs right now is not bigger and better atom smashers or more atomic piles—instead it needs some genius who can sense a coordinated connection between a hundred different aspects of the atomic structure of matter. This hypothetical genius would do more for science than all the mechanisms on Earth.

The proper end of scientific theory is economy—that is, you try to explain a phenomenon in the simplest, most logical way. Simplicity is a good yardstick for measuring theories. Unfortunately, nuclear physics fails to meet this measurement and the result is that the laboratories are grinding out mas-

sive amounts of new data without knowing what the old has shown them.

The old saw about "the more you know, the less you know" has more than a kernel of truth. Nuclear physics is getting so complicated that hardly one man can be more than an expert in one tiny segment of it. Some scientists have gone so far to suggest that the only way this impasse will ever be cleared is when huge mechanical brains are devised which will be

able to collate and synthesize sense from a bewildering complexity of fact. They suggest that if for no other reason, mechanical brains must be devised!

On the other hand—science is sometimes a funny thing. It is perfectly possible that some thinker may see a complete connection and the whole fantastic complexity of nuclear physics may be reduced to a simple sensible picture capable of being understood at a glance—we hope!



"I've lost them! They must be in outer space!"

Brown John's Body

by

Winston Marks

Erd Neff wanted as little to do with his fellow men as possible. So he lived alone in his big cash-vault. Alone, except for John . . .

ERD Neff dropped a thin bundle of currency into the \$100 bill drawer of the flat-top desk and kicked the drawer shut with a dusty boot.

He flicked the drip from his hooked nose, which was chronically irritated by the wheat dust of the warehouse, then he wiped his fingers down the leg of his soiled denims. Across the 12 X 12, windowless room John stirred awake from the noise and began nosing in the debris of his filthy cage.

"Time for supper, John?" Neff tugged at the twine at his belt and examined his \$3 watch. He pinched a dozen grains of wheat from a two-pound coffee can and let them sift through the wires of the cage. John pounced on the grain hungrily.

"Wait a minute! What do you say, dammit?" Neff's hand reached for the marshmallow-toasting fork that hung from a hook on the

wall. He touched the points, filed needle sharp. "What do you say?" he repeated, twanging the tines like a tuning fork.

John skittered to the far corner, tearing new holes in the old newspaper with frantic claws. Cowering against the wires he spat half-chewed flecks of wheat trying to say the magic words that would spare him from the fork. "Tinkoo! Tinkoo!" he squeaked, straining to make the two syllables distinct.

Neff hung up the fork, and John turned to lick at the old scabs clotted from earlier jabs, taking sullen inventory to be sure there were no new crimson leaks in his louse-infested hide. Until two months ago, he had been just one more gregarious specimen of *Mammalia Rodentia Simplicidentata Myomorphia Muridae decumanus*. Now he had another name. Like each of his predecessors in the cage, he was a large, brown rat called



John—after Erd Neff's despised and deceased father. Neff named all his rats John.

"Well, don't get fat."

John finished the grain, pawed the air and squeaked, "Mur!"

"More, hey? You talk fine when you're hungry."

"Peef, mur, mur!" John begged. He did well with his vowels, but "I" and "s" sounds were beyond him. He said "f" for "s". "L's" he ignored entirely.

Neff gave him one more wheat head. "Okay, get fat!"

He turned to the door, lifted the inside, mechanical latch, shoved with his foot and snatched his revolver from his hip-holster. The vault door opened ponderously revealing an empty warehouse. Neff peeked through the crack between the hinges to clear the area concealed by the door itself.

One hoodlum hopeful had hidden there. Spotting him through the crack, Neff had simply beefed into the foot-thick slab of fire-proof steel. Inertial plus surprise had disposed of that one. Neff

hadn't even had to shoot.

TONIGHT there was no one. Funny. The wheat country was getting tame, or else the tin-horns had learned their lesson. It was no secret that Erd Neff never visited the local bank, yet it had been more than six months since anyone tried to hold him up.

The local bank hated him plenty. He was costing them. His five loan offices in the rich wheat county skimmed the cream of the mortgage loan business. Of course, nowadays most people paid off their loans, and the low interest rates he charged to lure the business barely paid expenses. Yet, he still picked up an occasional foreclosure. Farmers still got drunk divorced, gambled, broke legs or committed suicide once in awhile, and Neff's loan documents were ruthless about extensions of time.

These foreclosed acreages he traded for grain elevators and warehouses when crops were small and operators were desperate. Then came the bumper years during and after World War II. Wheat on the ground and no place to store it but in Erd Neff's sheds. It wasn't cheap to store with Neff, and he had a virtual monopoly in Ulma

Neff swung the great door back into place with its *whoosh-thunk* County.

that sealed in air, sound and nearly a hundred thousand dollars in currency. He levered the bolts into place and spun the expensive combination lock.

The vault, tucked away in the front, left-hand corner of the old frame warehouse expressed Neff's distrust and contempt for mankind. Concrete and steel. Bed shower, toilet and desk. In this walk-in cash box he was fire-proof, bomb-proof, theft-proof and, most important of all, people-proof. There he consorted unmolested with the one mammal on earth he found interesting — John, the brown rat.

He slid the broad warehouse door closed behind him with a cacophony of dry screeches and padlocked it. The dusty street was deserted except for a black sedan which two-wheeled the corner a block away and sped toward him. Neff dropped his pistol back in its holster. "Now, what the hell—?"

He waited on the splintery platform, a huge man, ugly of face, shortlegged and long-bodied with a belly swollen from regular overeating. His shaved head swivelled slowly as the police car leaned in to a skid-stop.

Officer Collin Burns got out and stared up at the motionless statue in sweat-dust stained denims. Burns was half Neff's 56 years, tall and thin. He wore gray,

a silver star and a big black hat. He said, "I'll take your gun, Erd."

"Now what? I got a permit."

"Not any more. It's revoked."

"For why?"

"There were witnesses this afternoon."

"Witnesses? What in hell are you — oh, no! Not that damned dog?"

"The puppy belonged to a little girl. You can't claim self-defense this time."

"He was coming down here chasing the cats away every day."

"So you shot him, like you did Greeley's collie."

"Cats count for more. You know well as I do, you can't control the rats around a warehouse without cats."

"You've shot five men, too, Erd. Three of them are dead."

"I was cleared, you know damned well! Self-defense."

"You're too handy with that pistol. Anyway, I didn't file this complaint. It was the child's mother, and she made it stick with the chief. Give me the gun, Erd."

"You got a warrant for my arrest?"

"No, but I will have in an hour if you insist."

"I got a perfect right to protect my property."

"Not with a gun. Not any

more."

"I just get these punks convinced, and now you want to turn loose on me again. Who put you up to this Collin?"

"You did. When you shot that pup. I'm not here to debate it. You're breaking the law from this minute on if you don't hand over the gun."

"Dammit, Collin, you know how much money I got in there? You know how much I pack around on me sometimes?"

"That's your business. You can use the bank and bonded messengers — they get along with dogs."

"Telling me how to run my business?"

"I'm telling you to give me that gun. You'll get the same police protection as any other citizen."

Neff sneered openly. "I'd a been dead thirty years ago depending on cops."

"I don't doubt that a minute. You're easy to hate, Erd. Are you going to give me that gun?"

"No."

"You like things the hard way, don't you?" Burns got back in the squad car and drove off. Neff spat a crater in the wheat-littered dust and got into his own car.

TWO minutes later he turned up Main Street and stopped before city hall. Inside the tiny po-

lice station he dropped his pistol on the counter. Bud Ackenbush looked up from his desk. "You could have saved Collin some trouble."

Neff stalked out without a word and crossed the street to the Palace Cafe. He ordered a double-thick steak, fried potatoes and pie. He liked the way the waitresses scrambled for the chance to wait on him. Women didn't like him. He was ugly and smelled of sweat, and on the street women looked the other way when they met him. All but the waitresses at the Palace. When he came in they showed their teeth and tongues and wiggled their hips. He was a 50-cent tipper.

The important thing was it got him his steak, really double thick and double quick. People could be real efficient. Like brown John. Prod 'em where they live and they'll do anything. Even talk to you.

"You look kinda naked tonight, Erd," Gloria kidded.

Neff wiped steak juice from his chin and stared at her breasts. It used to excite him, but now it was just habit. It was better than looking at red-smears lips that smiled and eyes that didn't, eyes that said, "Don't forget the tip, you filthy bastard!"

Funny. Hang a gun on any

other citizen in town and people would stare. Take the gun off of Erd Neff and people make cracks.

He did feel naked.

"I didn't order this damned succotash!"

"It's free with the steak dinner, Erd."

Go ahead, pinch my leg like the harvesting crews do. I'm free with the dinner, too. Like the ketchup. Like the mustard and the salt and pepper and the steak sauce and the sugar and the extra butter if you ask for it, just don't forget the tip.

Clarence Hogan, the fry-cook, came around the counter and leaned on the booth table beside Gloria. "You don't like succotash? How about some nice peas, Erd?"

Clarence was Gloria's husband. Pimp!

"Put some ice-cream on my pie," Neff said. He looked up at Clarence. "No, I don't want any god-damned peas!"

They brought his pie and left him alone. He finished it and felt in his pocket for the tip. He changed his mind. To hell with Gloria and her fat leg! The steak was tough.

He paid the check and went out. The sky was pink yet. Later in the week the sunsets would be blood-red, as the great combines increased in number and cruised the rippling ocean of wheat, leaving brist-

ly wakes and a sky-clogging spray of dust.

Neff's busiest season. Damn that dog! Damn Collin Burns!

His hand brushed his leg where the leather holster should be. Damned laws that men made. Laws that acquitted him of homicide and then snatched away his only weapon of self-defense because he shot a yapping dog.

As he got in his car Collin Burns came out of the station. He tossed Neff's gun through the open window onto the seat. "Here's your property. The Marshal came in, and he changed everybody's mind. It's going to cost you a hundred dollars and a new pup for the little girl, probably. Here's the subpoena. Tuesday at ten."

"I don't get it."

"The Marshal said to let you fight your own battles."

NEFF started the car and let the clutch out. The Marshal knew his way around. The transient harvesting crews were a wild bunch. If word got out that Neff was unarmed, packing thousands of dollars the length of the county, the enforcement people would have a lot of extra work on their hands.

He parked behind the warehouse, next to the railroad tracks.

He came around front, unlocked the big door, pulled it shut behind

him and bolted it. The warehouse was jet black now, but he knew every inch of the place. He could fire his pistol almost as accurately at a sound as at a visible target. He practiced on rats.

Holding a pocket flash, he worked the combination. As the final tumbler fell silently, a faint, raspy screech came to his ears, like a board tearing its rusty nails loose under the persuasion of a wrecking bar. He listened a minute, then he levered the bolts back, stepped into the vault-room, closed the door and shot the mechanical bolts.

Sure. Someone was out there, but they'd get damned tired before morning. He flicked on the light and touched the other wall switch beside it. The powerful blower and sucker fans cleared out the musty air and rat-stink.

John rustled in the cage, blinking at the sudden light. "Hi, Neff! Meat! Meat! Meat!"

Smart little devil! Neff sometimes brought him a scrap from his dinner, but he hadn't thought to tonight. He sucked at his teeth and pulled out a tiny string of steak. "Here. Bite my finger and I'll poke both your eyes out."

John picked the thread of gristle from Neff's finger with his forepaws and devoured it, trembling with pleasure. Neff lifted the cage. "Okay, now let's have a few

tricks."

At once John made for the can of wheat. "Get outta there!" Neff scooped him up and dropped him on the desk, snapping his tail with a forefinger. John whirled, laid his ears back and opened his mouth. At bay, the brown rat, Neff knew, is the most ferocious rodent of the 2000 species, but Neff held his hand out daring John to bite.

Neff knew all about rats. More than anybody in the world knew about rats. When you live among them for three decades you find out about their cunning wariness, fecundity, secretiveness, boldness, omnivorous and voracious appetites. Fools reviled them as predators and scavengers. Neff appreciated them for what they really are: The most adaptable mammal on earth.

John was smart but no smarter than the rest. Neff had proved this by teaching every rat he captured alive to talk.

Impossible they had told him. Even parrots and parakeets only imitate sounds in their squawking — yes, and pet crows. Animals don't have thinking brains, they said. They react, trial and error, stimulus and response, but they don't *think*.

Neff didn't know about the others, but he knew about rats.

Keep them hungry and lonely for a mate. Hurt them. Torture them. To hell with this reward business. Rats are like men. Mentally lazy. They'll go for bait, sure, but they'll go faster to escape pain — a thousand times faster.

And rats have lived with man from the first. They have a feeling for language like the human brat. Between partitions, inches from a man's head when he lies in bed talking to his wife, under a man's feet while he's eating, over his head in the warehouse rafters while he's working. Always, just inches or feet away from man, running through sewers, hiding in woodpiles, freight-cars, ships, barns, slaughter-house, skulking down black alleys, listening, hiding, stealing, always listening.

Yes, rats know about man, but rats had never known a man like Erd Neff, a man who hated all mankind. A man who chose a rat for a companion in preference to one of his own kind. Rats named John learned about Neff. They learned that his tones and inflections had specific meaning. They learned very fast under the stabbing prod of the marshmallow fork. With just enough food to keep them alive, their blind ferocity changed into painful attention. They learned to squeak and squawk and form the sounds into

a pattern with their motile tongues. In weeks and months, they learned what the human brat learned in years.

"Stand up like a goddamned man!"

JOHN stood up, his tail the third point of the support.

"Say the alphabet."

"Eh — bih — fih — dih — ih — eff — jih — etch —"

Neff lit a cigar and watched the smoke float away from the ceiling blower and vanish into the overhead vent in the far corner. He bobbed one foot in time to the squeaky rhythm of the recitation. He took no exception to John's failure with "I," "s", and "z". The other Johns had been unable to handle them, too.

"Hungrih, Neff. Hungrih!"

The big man picked out three grains of wheat. He noticed the can was almost empty. One by one he handed the kernels to his pet, waiting for John's "Tinkoo!" in between.

"Mur! Mur!"

"Lazy tongue! It's *more*, not mur!"

John dropped to all fours and retreated. Usually Neff slapped him in the belly when he used that tone. But Neff was bemused tonight. He kept listening for sounds, sounds that he knew could

never penetrate the thick walls.

They were out there, he was sure. Another damned fool or two, flashing a light around, trying to figure out something. Neff remembered one pair who had even tried nitroglycerin. He saw the burns on the outside of the door the next morning.

Amateurs! Nobody knew for sure just how much money Neff kept in the old desk, and big-time pros wouldn't tackle a job like this without a pretty fair notion of the loot. For all they knew, maybe he mailed it to an out-of-town bank.

"Okay, fetch the pencil."

John jumped from the desk and moved toward the open door of the shower-stall where Neff had thrown the pencil stub. He paused by the wheat can, then scurried on to get the pencil. He climbed Neff's leg and dropped the pencil into the open palm.

"Smart punks up at State College. So you can't teach a rat anything but mazes and how to go nuts from electric shocks, eh? Wouldn't they be surprised to meet you, John?"

"Hungrih!"

"You're always hungry!"

"Meat! Meat!"

"Yeah. You can sound your 'e's' real good when you say, 'meat.' Somebody I'll cut off your tail and feed it to you." He laughed, grab-

bed John by the coarse hair of his back and slipped him back under the cage.

Then he undressed down to his underwear, turned out the light and lay on the narrow iron bed. John rustled in his cage for a minute, then there was only the faint hum of the blower and sucker motors in the ventilating system. The incoming and outgoing air was baffled and trapped to kill sounds, and spring-loaded sliding doors poised to jam shut and seal off the room if anyone tampered with the exterior grilles in the roof.

The fans hummed softly and Erd Neff slept.

Sleck-thud, sleek-thud!

HE was awake pawing the wall for the light switch, but even as his hand found it, and his eyes discovered the closed ventilator doors, a reddish vapor sank over his body. A single gasp and Neff was clawing his throat. Sharp, brown-tasting, acid-burning, eye-searing, nose-stinging!

He fell to his knees and clawed to the far corner, fighting for air, but the acrid stink stained his throat and nose. His eyes kept burning. The whole room must be full!

The door-lever! No, that's what they wanted. Blind! Gun's no good now. God, for a breath of

air! Damned tears! Can't open my eyes! Air! *Got to have it!*

His throat refused to open. The stink, a little like iodine, a lot like a hospital smell but a million times stronger—raked at the tender tissues of his throat. Icepicks stabbed from his soft palate, up into his brain, his temples. He swayed against the door, caught the lever and heaved convulsively. The door fell away slowly. He stumbled forward, gashing his knee against the sharp jamb.

A light struck redly through his clenched, tear-soaked eye-lids.

"That did it. Get the gun!" The voice was high, almost girlish. A young boy?

A slightly heavier voice said, "Got it. Keep an eye on him while I find out why the fan stopped working."

"He's going no place. You were right. That bromine stuff really did the business. Lookit his face. Sure it won't kill him?"

"Don't care if it does now. We got the door open."

"What is this bromine, anyhow? Boy it sure stinks!"

"It's a chemical element like chlorine, only it's a liquid. It fumes if you don't keep it covered with water, and the fumes really get you. They used it in gas bombs in the war."

"That was chlorine."

"They used bromine, too. I read it."

"Air!" Neff rasped.

"Help yourself if you call this stinkin' stuff in your warehouse air."

From the vault the deadened voice came. "This must be the switch. The other switch is for the lights."

"Look out! When you turn it on don't get dosed yourself."

"I only dumped a few drops in. There. It'll blow out in a few—phew, let me outta here. That stuff does—God, it's worse than the dose I got in the chem lab!" The voice grew, coughing and cursing. "Better wait a minute or two. How's our big brave dog-killer doing?"

On his hands and knees, Neff was on the verge of passing out, but doggedly he tried to place the voices. Highschool kids? *Bromine*. Sounded like a chemical they might filch from the highschool laboratory.

A kick in the ribs reminded him he was still helpless. "All right, get back in there." They aimed him through the vault door and kept kicking him until he went. They hauled him up into his chair. He tried to strike out blindly, but his chest was full of licking flames that spread pain out to his shoulders.

Now rope whipped around his feet, hands, chest and neck, jerking his body hard against the cast-iron desk-chair and cramping his head back. "Tie him good. No way to lock him in with this door."

Neff opened his eyes. The boys were wet blurs rummaging through his desk. "Look! Just look at that! We can't carry all that."

"Get one of those burlap sacks out there. By the door."

Footsteps went and returned. "Now, just the small bills. Up to twenty. No, Jerry, leave the big stuff alone. Who'd take one from a kid?"

"Okay, let's make tracks."

"Wait! Neff said desperately. "My legs and hands. You've cut off the circulation!"

SOMETHING hard like 'he barrel of a gun rapped down on the top of his head. "I ought to blow your dirty brains out. Killing my little sister's dog, damn you. Damn you, I think I will kill you. Damn you, damn you!" the voice crested.

"Wait a minute Jerry," the other voice cut in. "I got a better idea. Here. Look at this."

Short silence. "Yeah! Yeah, that's just dandy. Look how thin he is. That's just what the doctor ordered. Okay, the top's loose. Stand by the door and don't let

him get by you. Wait. Got your flash? Good! In the dark. That's real good. Which switch is it?"

"Throw them both."

"Okay. Flash it over here. Look out, here I come!"

"Hurry up! Look at that hungry, black-eyed little devil. That ought to fix up the son-of-a—" .. *Thunk!* The compression rammed heavily into Neff's ears. The bolts shot solidly into place from the outside, and the combination knob rang faintly as it was spun. Silence.

They'd go out the same way they came in and tack the board back in place. How long before anybody would miss him? Twenty-four hours? Hell, no. Nobody would bust a gut worrying that soon. Two days? Some weeks he was gone several days making the rounds of his loan offices.

A week? Maybe. Girls at the Palace would get suspicious. Tell Collin Burns.

But a week! They'd cut off the blower when they threw both switches. No ventilation. No air.

Neff strained at the ropes. His legs were pulled under the seat so tightly that his feet were turning numb. Hands were tingling, too. Dirty little sadists. Turning John loose thinking—

He *had* to get loose. Less than one day's air, then—

"John!" Thank God John wasn't an ordinary rat.

"John, come over to me. These ropes. Chew them, John. Come on, John. Come on, boy."

No sound at first, then a faint motion in the old newspapers. "John, say the alphabet!"

"Eh—bih —"

"That's right. Go on!"

"Fih ——— jih ———" The squeaking stopped.

"Come over to me, John. Come to me, boy."

He held his breath. The beating of his heart was so loud he couldn't be sure that John was moving. The silence was long. Even the rat was blind in this blackness. He must be patient.

Sweat began oozing and trickling down his face, his armpits, his back—even his left leg. No, wait! That wasn't sweat!

THE throbbing in his legs was greatest at his left knee. The trickle was blood from the gash. It ran freely, now, the ropes backing up arterial pressure. Never mind that!

"John!"

The coffee can tipped over, and the racket made Neff start against his bonds. The rope sawed his Adam's apple.

Crunch!

"Leave that damned wheat

alone, John. Come over to me, boy. I'll give you a whole bag full when you chew off these ropes. Hear that, John? And a chicken foot. I'll bring you a whole chicken. A live one. I'll tie her down so she won't peck you. That's what I'll do, John."

He was breathing heavily now. "Do you get me, John? Would you like a live chicken?"

"Yeff."

The crunching resumed for a minute then stopped. Neff remembered, there had been only a dozen or so grains of wheat left. John would still be hungry. The thought of a chicken should do it. If not, he could threaten him.

Neff waited. Relax! There was all night to work this out.

Finally, he felt something at his ankles. "That's the boy, John. Up here and down my arms. They're behind me. Get the rope off my hands first. Come on boy."

It was John, all right. Neff could feel the little claws coming up his left leg.

"Come on, hurry up, John. Tell you what. I'll bring you a nice,

fat female, just like yourself. A live one. You can live in the cage together — — John, don't stop there!"

The claws had paused near his knee and were clinging to the blood-soaked cloth.

"No, no, John! Don't! I'll stick you with the fork. I'll stick you — I'll kill you! John, we got to get out of here or we'll both die. Die, do you hear! We'll suffocate! Don't do that. Stop. Stop or I'll—"

Neff's threats beat hard into the rat's brain, and now as the slanting incisors tore at the cloth and chewed the luscious, blood-smothered, hot meat, Neff's screams sent tremors through the skinny, voracious body, and the tail tucked down. The words made John nervous, but it was dark. And there was food, such wonderful food, so much food!

They were harsh words, terrible, screaming words: but words are words and food is food, and after all—

John was only a rat.

THE END

FEATURED NEXT MONTH:—

COSMIC SABOTEUR

by

FRANK M. ROBINSON

If you were kidnapped from Earth as a youth—do you think you could be indoctrinated to hate your race? Don't miss this significant novel!



Conducted by Mari Wolf

THE World Science Fiction Convention held in San Francisco is now history. To you, reading this, it's rather ancient history; to me, writing it, it's something barely over. I'm still sleepy from it. While I write this, fans are still leaving San Francisco, catching their planes or buses or trains or heading their automobiles out onto the open road. The physical evidences of the convention are still scattered about the Sir Francis Drake Hotel — programs and campaign literature for next year's site. (Next year it's Cleveland.)

Almost all Convention reports, if they're straight accounts of what happened, read very much the same. To a certain extent, all conventions are very much the same. There are the program highlights—the speeches and the panel discussions and the auction,

the banquet and the masquerade. There are all the after hours parties that go on and on through most of the night. But if you've been to several Conventions you can see the changes that accumulate year by year. Fans who remember the really early Conventions, when fandom was a relatively small group and almost everyone you met at a Convention was an old friend, can see this change still more clearly.

Les and Es Cole and all the rest of the San Francisco Convention Committee did a fine job with the program. Willy Ley's speech, especially, was one nobody should have missed. It was odd, somehow, learning at a science fiction convention that two new natural moons have been discovered around Earth. (At the time I'm writing this the news, though out a couple of weeks, hasn't had time to hit the

Sunday supplement pages or the science for the layman journals.) For me the high points of the regular program were Willy Ley's account of the moons, both the natural ones and the proposed artificial satellites, and the panel discussion on the question "Is Science Unduly Restricted?" To me, anyway, discussions on science and the layman's attitude toward science are among the most interesting that can be discussed at a science-fiction convention. After all, science and technology and the world's reaction to them are the background of stf; the field could hardly exist without them.

Too, discussions on science fiction itself often degenerates into a "science-fiction-versus-something-or-other" argument that to me seems rather silly. For instance, the panel discussion on science fiction versus the detective story—why should there be any conflict between the forms, or an Aristotelian this-is-better-than-that approach?—it's the same thing with the "maturity-versus-action" arguments you've seen in past conventions (not this one). I can't see accepting one form as being better than all the others. If you are in a well rounded field you have them all.

I remember sitting at the banquet, looking around at hundreds of strange faces and unfamiliar name badges, and wondering, where now, conventions. The San Francisco affair was smaller than the Chicago one (I didn't get to Philadelphia, so I can't judge first hand there). But it was still big. Almost too big, in some respects.

After the program was over people scattered into a dozen groups, and sometimes, if you got separated from the group with which you were intending to spend the evening, it was almost impossible to find it again.

Today's science-fiction convention is big. It's not only big in the number of fans attending, it's big business. The days when, if you read science-fiction, you hid it from teachers, parents, or the fellow at the next desk are way in the past. Being a science-fiction enthusiast no longer sets you apart—everyone's getting in on the fun of discovering stf. And sometimes, at a convention, it seems as if everyone's attending.

A lot of fans think the Conventions are too big. I'm inclined to agree. They have a tendency to become decentralized. If, at a science-fiction convention, it were possible to get a whole floor or block of rooms, turn it over to the attendees for their use during the night as well as the day, a lot of the troubles arising from the size of the things would be allayed. As it is, when the program is over and the main hall closes up and fans by the hundreds start roaming through the halls of the convention hotel, there are bound to be people feeling left out. There are also bound to be a few people making more noise than the hotel management thinks they should.

A lot of the younger fans especially come to see people, both pros and fans, and if everyone immediately vanishes to every corner of the hotel the young fan is likely to feel left out indeed. Of

course, people will always split off into their own groups; it would be impossible trying to keep everyone together and no one would have much fun that way. But if there were large meeting rooms for parties at night, meeting rooms where just about everyone would drop in and out during the course of the convention, everyone would probably be happier—the fans, the hotel management, and the other guests.

THE Conventions change from year to year in a lot of little ways. Four or five years ago autograph collecting, for example, worked quite differently than it does now. Then trading signatures on the program booklet was an accepted part of the convention. If there were two hundred people present you'd get home with close to two hundred signatures. If you'd been a fan for very long you'd usually know a good deal about most of the people whose names you'd collected; not many people wandered in off the streets to a science fiction get-together in those days. Now that there are so many people autograph collecting has become more like it has always been in other fields, and the reciprocal name-trading of the past hasn't left many remnants.

(Some fans have a good system for obtaining collectors' items. They bring along an anthology or two and try to get all the authors included to sign their own stories.)

From year to year the Conventions have a habit of growing. It's not a linear growth; when the Convention is held a long way from

the center of the country, as it was this year, you'll find fewer people than during the last centrally located one. I don't know what the registration at San Francisco was; I imagine it was six or seven hundred, maybe more.

It was big enough so that even if you knew some one was present and wanted to meet him you might never see him. It was also big enough so that you met all sorts of people from your own home area whom you'd never run into before. For me it was old home Los Angeles week. I ran into writers whom I hadn't seen since the Westercon last year, and I kept meeting for the first time other writers who're comparatively near neighbors.

On the train going up, for example, we were sitting in the snack car across from a man who caught our attention because he was reading a large, thick book. He seemed to be the only other literate person present. There may have been others—we don't know—but we got to talking and found out that he was the writer Charlie Beaumont, whom I've always just missed running into at Forrie Ackerman's.

At San Francisco just about everyone from Los Angeles and San Diego as well as the Bay area were there. (And lots and lots of people from all over the rest of the country.) It was a fine opportunity for fans to meet their favorite writers in person. Big as the Convention was, it was still possible to track down the pros you wanted to meet. It was easier to find Big Name fans, especially

in the daytime. Most of them spent a good deal of their time in the registration room, where the stands displaying fanzines and club activities were set up. (However, this room was locked at night, as well as during parts of the day. Why?)

The auction has changed too, over the years. Once, when fandom was smaller and most fans were collectors or the close friends of collectors, the auction was one of the highpoints of the program. Nothing interfered with it. It had a place of honor on the Convention program and almost everyone attended. (I don't like auctions; I used to find it hard to collect other auction haters to avoid the things with me.)

This time it was more of a running auction. Material was auctioned off at several sessions during the Convention. Lots and lots of people attended; prices were good and the material sold well; but the accent had shifted away from it. To a lot of newcomers to fandom there was probably no significance at all in the original illustrations and manuscripts and covers being bought by the collectors. A thing that was once of primary importance to fandom as a whole is now of interest to only a certain part.

The program has changed too. Not basically—as I said earlier the speeches and the panel discussions that are the backbones of the planned program of any convention are very much the same. But more and more of a professional note is creeping into the program. It started in Chicago two years ago with the ballet (which I wish

everyone could have seen). The trend continued still stronger in San Francisco with the opera, made from Ray Bradbury's "A Scent of Sarsaparilla." The opera was produced by a professional cast; the chorus especially was very, very good; and Tony Boucher's narration—well, there should have been more of it. Just about everyone was very pleased with the overall result.

But it is different. More and more programs are being put on for fans, but no longer so much by fans. Fan participation in the program seems to grow less each year. To a certain extent the very size of the Conventions makes this inevitable, as does the increasing number of casual sf readers who come to hear editors and writers talk and may know nothing about the amateurs in the field. But it seems to me that there could be a better balance. There could be part of the program given by fans for fans. There could easily be, if a large room were available day and night, time for fan entertainment and discussion of the problems and rewards of amateur publishing.

Science fiction isn't a field where the professional members, after years of study and schooling, sit off on a pinnacle above the fans. Most of the pros were fans, and often not too long ago. I don't think Conventions should be one way affairs, with the fans the passive audience. And I don't think the groups should split, with the pros having their own conventions and the amateurs theirs.

Cleveland next year will un-

doubtedly host a still bigger Convention. The problems could be intensified—or they could be to a large extent solved. I think that plenty of room, meeting rooms for fans and pros and the casual passersby from the street, will do more toward solidifying the fun of the Convention than a bigger and better program, more extensive press coverage, or anything else.

* * *

Now to this month's fanzines: PSYCHOTIC: 10c; Dick Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Portland 12, Oregon. Apt. 106. Very happy to see this issue. Last month I was able to frown over *Psycho's* cover and this month I am happy to say I have caught Geis in an unpardonable sin: plagiarism! He stole a line from someone else! I will admit it was a very short line—only four words — and he did enclose it in quotes. But I think that the truth should be known; let the chips fall where they may. The line on page one that reads—"is an honorable man" wasn't written by Geis. I know, 'cause with my very own ears I heard Marlon Brando say it in a movie.

What is fandom coming to when the most you can criticize in a zine is a four word quote? *Psychotic* is, as usual, good from cover to cover. I won't bother to list all of the contributors; if you read it, you know them; if you don't read it, you're so far out in fandom that you'd better buy *Psychotic* for the snob value.

Rating: 1

* * *

HYPHEN: 2/25c; Wat Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast,

North Ireland. This issue is largely given over to Convention reports—reports of the British Science Fiction Convention held in Manchester, that is. Of course if you don't know any of the people involved you're bound to lose out on a lot of the fun between the lines; so much depends on the personalities involved. But *Hyphen* has some of the best Convention coverers in the business, topped off by Willis himself, so that after you've read for a while you get the feeling you know everyone after all. (Shades of the Dashcon report . . .)

Walt Willis, Vinc Clarke and Chuck Harris give three different accounts of the Con, in which you learn, among other things, that a British fan wields a mighty mean water pistol.

There's also a one page coverage, Peter Yaler's "With Bottle and Pencil Thru the Convention." Good.

One question: maybe I missed a line somewhere in the account of Bert Campbell's getting left behind. But did he ever get there?

Rating: 2

* * *

ISFA: 15c; bimonthly; Edward McNulty, 5645 N. Winthrop St., Indianapolis, Indiana. This zine, sponsored by the Indiana Science Fiction Association, has some fan fiction that's considerably better than the average (though it could stand improving). Both Edward Nelson's "There are Exceptions" and Lee Ann Tremper's "Keller" deal with the theme of possession, but in very different ways. Nelson's story is the often written one

about alien parasites taking over a spaceship's crew. Tremper's is about the aptitude of babies born without eyes, ears or muscular control, and their relationship with their parents. It's *very* well done.

Then there's How to Do It article — "How to Write a Non-Fact Article or Critical Review," by W. Asparagus Leycamp.

And in the poetry section a selection by someone you'd hardly consider an stf writer—Lord Byron's "Darkness." Variety here.

Rating: 5

* * *

SPACESHIP: 10c; quarterly; Bob Silverberg. 760 Montgomery St., Brooklyn 13, N. Y. *Spaceship*, now in its sixth year of publication, is now back in FAPA (Fantasy Amateur Press Association). Copies are still available, fortunately, to nonFapans, however.

Almost all of the issue I have here is devoted to E. E. Smith and his works. Redd Boggs in "Flight of the Skylarks" takes you through the Skylark series, with a good long look at the author and his characterizations. Whether you're a Smith fan or not you'd find this well worth reading — it's comprehensive and *very* readable.

This is a fanzine that's been around a long time and shows signs of being around a lot longer. It could be studied to good advantage by a lot of the brand new fan editors.

Rating: 2

* * *

CHIGGER PATCH OF FANDOM: 25c; Bob Farnham, 204 Mountain View Drive, Dalton, Georgia. This one is an annual; it doesn't take

long term subscriptions but will be happy to send you the current issue.

The cover and general format is good; so is the mimeoing. Contents are varied, with more non-fiction than fiction. Joe Gibson writes on the politics of selecting the site for the following year's Convention in his article about smoke filled rooms. His suggestions on rotating the Convention site seem good; there has always, however, been a rough approximation of the rotating Con. (But it's sometimes been quite rough.)

There's Ed Cox's last man on Earth story, "The Watcher," poems by Orma McCormick and Stan Woolston and Harlan Ellison's article on the professional stf field.

Publisher Nan Gerding states, in telling what is wanted for publication in the Chigger Patch, that unless there's a big clamor for it the Bubbette type of story will be dropped and only satirical fiction used. No Bubbette this issue, more's the pity. I personally hope someone clamors.

Also included was a copy of Bob Tucker's new fan questionnaire—but that rates a review of its own.

Rating: 5

* * *

EISFA: 5c; monthly; Juanita R. Wellons, 529 Millon Ave., Anderson, Indiana. The Eastern Indiana Science Fiction Association, whose initials this zine bears, seems to be an active organization. The account of the club meeting given in this issue though can hardly be typical . . .

Robert Coulson's "Assignment in

Space" is a pretty stock story about the guy who's an iron disciplinarian and the guy who can't take discipline at all. The latter saves the spaceship, of course; he thinks the aliens are the DT's and isn't afraid of them.

Thomas Stratton and Robert Del Ray each have a copiously footnoted humor story, the footnotes supposedly carrying most of the humor. It's not a form I care about much, though.

Reproduction is okay, and some of Hal Hosteller's cartoons are really amusing.

A good buy for a nickel.

Rating: 4

* * *

VARIOSO: 10c; John L. Magnus Jr., 9312 Second Ave., Silver Spring, Maryland. Hal Clement has an article in this issue on "Characterizing an Alien." Clement, who perhaps is the one sf author most technically proficient at depicting completely alien physical environments now sets down some of the methods he uses in depicting his alien "people." You start with the external environment (type of sun, rotation period, gravity, atmospheric pressure and composition, temperature and a host of other factors); you add the biology that has arisen on this alien world (speed of nerve impulses, type of sense receptors, method of reproduction) and you extrapolate the alien psychology from these. Of course, you may have to be somewhat arbitrary in assigning emotions; some readers will accuse you of making your characters too unreal and others of making them too human . . .

An excellent article by the one person who could have written it.

Tucked away near the back is a gem of a story by Ray Schaffer Jr. It's called "A Lackaj is a Jackel," and it's quite impossible to describe without doing it an injustice. It's true satire (which 98 percent of fan satire isn't) and it really should have come out in a college humor mag or one of the more literary journals. If not sold. Slightly Thurberish, but without copying anyone's style.

An excellent issue.

Rating: 1

* * *

ZIP: 5c; Ted E. White, 1014 N. Tuckahoe St., Falls Church, Virginia. Far and away the choicest item in this issue is a reprint from the *Fantasy Fictioneer*, 1939. It's Hoy Ping Pong's "An Open Letter to a Congressman," a letter in which Pong, the secretary of the League for Aiding Starving Martians, makes a plea for American aid, in the form of oxygen, to Mars . . . By a strange coincidence Pong lived in Bloomington, Illinois, the home of another writer whose name you may have heard mentioned—Bob Tucker . . .

There's a story by John G. Fletcher, "Supply Ship," about a small boy who foils the Villains who've Stolen the Spaceship; however, the climax isn't written. It's skipped. You have the events leading up to the denouement, and the epilogue, and that's that. Don Wegers, in the nonfiction section, writes about the travails of a fanzine editor; and there's a rather extensive letter section too.

A mimeoed legible fanzine, much

better now that it's full sized. A good value for a nickel.

Rating: 5

* * *

PHANTASMAGORIA: Derek Pickles, 197, Cutler Heights Lane, Bradford 4, Yorkshire, England. Pickles and Stan Thomas put out this British zine, which they're distributing free! (But if you're on the west side of the Atlantic I suggest you send enough to cover postage.)

Phantasmagoria is more of a news letter—at least in its earlier issues. It covers the Manchester convention and other fan doings of note, and its full of comments about British fandom. Probably, though, it would be of much more interest to British fans and their intimate friends than to most Americans. /

Rating: 6

* * *

SPIRAL: 10c; bimonthly; Denis Moreen, 214 Ninth St., Wilmette, Ill. Dick Geis has a column in *Spy* called "The Violent Ward" that, in itself, can be well worth your dime. In the issue I have here Geis goes to the movies, reviewing "The Creature from the Black Lagoon." I've seen the picture and read the review, and all I can say is I regret not having read the review first . . .

Ed Cox in his "Oh, So You Read SF, Do You," presents a rebuttal to an earlier article of Geis' in *Spiral*. Geis made the point that many fans identify themselves with the "homo superior" of the stories; Cox made the also valid point that many readers of mystery or westerns or adventure literature make

the same sort of hero identification. Still, though, your western or mystery fan usually doesn't consider himself one of a breed apart because of his reading interest—and many an sf fan does just that.

Dennis Murphy has another story in this issue, "The Last Air Raid." It's not as good as some of his others in this magazine, but it's still pretty good fan fiction.

Reproduction is very good too.

Rating: 4

* * *

KAYMAR TRADER: 10c or 4-25c; monthly; K. Martin Carlson, 1028 Third Ave. So., Moorhead, Minn. Here's one fanzine that no collector of science fiction or fantasy material should be without. If you want to complete your collection of back copies of some magazine, whether last year's *MADGE* or something from the 20's, you're likely to find just what you want listed here. If you don't, you can always run a want ad. (Advertising rates in the *Trader* are very low; it's a zine for fans, not people with oodles of money.)

If you're looking for a fanzine with a lot of reading material, this one isn't for you. But if you're buying, selling, or just window-shopping, you'll want it.

Rating: 3

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; published twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. One of the issues I have here of this science fiction newspaper is really a beauty. It's an anniversary issue—the 200th one that *Fantasy-Times* has put out. This certainly must hold the rec-

ord for number of published issues among fanzines; I wonder if any other amateur publication can top it . . .

As well as the regular news of the professional and amateur stf field, the magazine and book publishers, the movie, radio and TV science fiction, and foreign reports, this particular issue carries some excellent articles on the field as a whole. MADGE'S own Bill Hamling in "Alas, What Boom" gives a good picture of what has happened in the field during the past couple of years. It's a very good

article on a subject a lot of fans have been talking about, well worth scrounging up a back issue of F-T to read.

Rating: 2

* * *

Well, that's all for this time. Next issue I'll get a chance to review all the zines given to me at San Francisco—these fanzine reviews are pre-convention. If you have a zine you want reviewed send it to me, Mari Wolf, *Fandora's Box*, IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois.

—Mari Wolf

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF IMAGINATION, Stories of Science and Fantasy, published monthly at Evanston, Illinois for January, 1955.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:
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Managing Editor, Frances Hamling, 1426 Fowler Ave., Evanston, Illinois.

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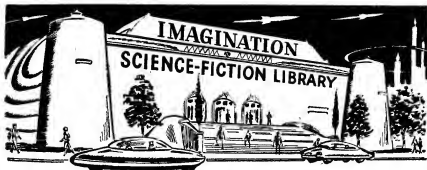
WILLIAM L. HAMLING, Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1954

(SEAL)

WENZEL A. PELZ.

(My commission expires May 27, 1956)



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review several titles — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

ASSIGNMENT IN TOMORROW

Edited and with an introduction by Frederick Pohl, 317 pages, \$2.95. Hanover House, Garden City, New York

While it seems that there is no end to anthologies—and this one—there is a wide variation in quality. This anthology is first rate. It includes a short novel, three novelettes and twelve short stories all by “big name” writers such as Sturgeon, Kornbluth, Bixby, Bester, Vonnegut, Gold, Williamson, Farmer and many others.

Bester’s unusual story “5,217,009” almost is worth the price of the book alone. For that matter many other stories are equally good, though the memorable Mr. Solon Aquila will not soon leave your mind.

If all anthologies were as selec-

tive as this one, the mining of magazines, fantastic as it has been with so many anthologies pouring forth, would be perfectly justified. Unfortunately that isn’t the usual case.

This book, however, you may buy with perfect assurance that you’re getting your money’s worth.

Farmer’s “Mother” is a superb example of what science fiction can be in spite of its hideous theme. The ability to evoke a response from readers is the mark of writing skill. Farmer has that skill.

It is possible almost to pick stories at random in this meaty volume and be assured of getting something well worth reading. It’s not possible to say that about most anthologies. By all means, read this!

Letters

from the

Readers

"WEAPON" SATELLITE?

Dear Bill:

Seems we've got the makings of a good, solid discussion with the Space Station controversy. There are a lot of angles to the space station scheme which I'd like to cover, so I'll go into a few of them now.

You say you "don't agree, period" that a space station is no longer practical for military purposes, so so let us consider some of the reasons it *isn't* practical.

First, a space station circling the Earth in a close orbit—say, once every two hours—couldn't be hidden from view. It could be dull black and it would still appear on astronomers' photographs; and from that, anybody with a backyard telescope could spot it. Furthermore, anybody could *study* it.

This brings up a technical fact most people don't realize; radar is only better than the naked eye. Radar can spot a large-sized object several hundred miles away, which would be too far for the un-

aided eye to see it. But radar can't spot anything you couldn't see yourself at distances of several thousand miles or more—it could spot a moonlet a few miles in diameter at such distances, but you could see that yourself. So for distances encountered in space, radar is useless. However, the plain, old-fashioned telescope works perfectly well. With it you can spot a clean, white tennis ball 1,000 miles up. Meteor detectors on spacecraft will probably be telescopes coupled with television screens which will trigger an alarm whenever any "foreign object" appears on them. Astrogation instruments will work through telescopes. And they'll do a perfectly good job that radar couldn't do.

Now consider the construction of a space station. A fully equipped station would be fairly large; add atomic-warhead missiles, and small missiles to defend itself, and it's even larger. It becomes too big to assemble on Earth and fire out into space in one package. All right,

you can carry its part into space in rockets (which you'll need to keep it supplied, anyway) and assemble it out there.

Suppose Russia did this! We'd be able to spot them the moment they started assembling their station out there. Would that station be completed and ready for business, d'you think, before we fired a space rocket out there to blast it to pieces?

But let's assume a space station is established, and that it's Russian. You and I, if we're still alive, are probably up in the hills with 'scope-mounted Winchester deer rifles. But the situation still isn't hopeless. There's one thing a space station can't defend itself against: that's gravel-sized meteors. Most meteors in space are no bigger than grains of sand, and a station's outer hull could stop them. Meteors the size of pebbles would "hole" a station, but they're so rare that when one did pierce the station, its crewmen could patch it and make repairs even though they might suffer a few casualties. One such meteor wouldn't knock out the station.

However, it would take a space rocket, only five minutes or less to reach a station's orbit. The station could be on the other side of the Earth when it does. It could eject thousands of tiny steel bearings, strewing them along the station's orbit, then return to Earth. Such tiny objects would be too small to detect before the station plowed into them.

Or you could tell from a station's size and shape how it was equipped, how many crewmen it has, and

how many large and small missiles it's armed with. Say it has 300 city-blasters and 200 small defensive missiles. Suppose you build 501 space rockets under a mountain range, somewhere, and fire them all at the station in one salvo?

Of course, you can assume that stations *might* have something that will protect them from pebble-sized meteors; and scientists *might* find a way to build stations on the ground and send them into space, complete and ready for business. They might put several stations up at the same time, so every square inch of the Earth's surface is being scrutinized simultaneously. With that you might argue that nobody could build space rockets to destroy the stations—the stations would spot any such project and blast it. But don't bet on it. There are plenty of underground installations already in existence, tho they aren't being used for the production of space rockets. And right now any such project would be a large undertaking, incredibly hard to hide,—but that's because it would take an incredible amount of research and production, right now to develop a space rocket. Once they've been developed, scientists are going to find easier ways to build them. The easier it gets, the smaller the project.

So you've simply got to hide a space station, if you're going to use it for military purposes. There is only one way to do that. Essentially, it would still be a space station, but you've got to build it underground—on the Moon!

We could build space rockets and try to construct a space station circling close to the Earth, right now. We aren't doing it. The Russians have a new "103" rocket motor and are developing a two-stage, long-range intercontinental missile, right now. We know about it. We're working on new ceramic-metal alloys (ceramets) with incredible heat resistance and super-hot, highly conductive gases which respond to strong magnetic fields; with these things, and an atomic-electric power plant, we'll have a ship that can land on the moon, unload cargo, and return to Earth. The Russians know it, and are undoubtedly working on the same thing.

A hundred years from now, either the world will be in a dark age of slavery, or a war-gutted wilderness, or several fair-sized republics will be on the map where the USSR is now.

I also agree that the USA would be a more benevolent protector than a dictatorial master of the world, if we had that base. But I wouldn't want us to keep that power, say, for 200 years. With a Moon Base maintaining world peace, people are going to become complacent. You only need to fool all of the people some of the time—and one man becomes a dictator. And with such power as the prize, some men would inevitably try to get control of it. No, we'll have to turn that Moon Base over to a World Government which none of us will ever fully trust. Then we will stay on our toes, and not become ignorant or complacent about its dangers.

There's a perfectly valid answer to the question raised by John Courtois in the October letter section, concerning whether the crewmen in a space station—or a Moon Base—would remain loyal to the government that put them there. Where do you think they'd be getting their supplies of tanked air, food and water—and what happens to revolutionists when their air gives out? If they demanded more supplies sent up a "supply rocket" with an atomic warhead could be sent. And who do you think would be sending out their replacements, so they could come down for a few weeks' whooping it up on the town? If one crewman showed revolutionary tendencies, the others would immediately clobber him. It wouldn't be too difficult at all to "watch the watchers" in this set-up!

Joe Gibson
24 Kensington Ave.
Jersey City 4, N. J.

Somewhere along the line our original thoughts concerning the space station have been confused or lost in a semantic labyrinth. Actually we do not look upon the space station so much as a military project, as we do a stepping stone for man to breach space—and the other planets in our solar system. The military aspect is a side issue. Such military importance crops up only in the event Russia beats us to the punch. We know we can't trust the Reds, and they might put one up primarily to take over this planet—before going on to others! That's the nub of the deal. We feel the USA would use it for man's progress—to enable us to

reach the Moon. And as we've said before, we feel the only salvation for mankind is to branch out, away from the petty squabbles of Earth; all of them would seem somewhat insignificant after the door to the Universe opened! But, until that time comes, we do have the problem under discussion. Incidentally, Joe, the space station would serve its purpose if we did reach the Moon, so you don't propose an alternate suggestion of a Moon Base when the station is in theory the means of accomplishing that end! Also, the 200 year business you mention is quite an exaggeration of a need for our governorship. Once space is actually conquered the new horizon will be visible to all on this planet. Then there'll be a dash—an exodus if you please—outward. Man may come into his own once he can see himself as a pin-point dot in the vast reaches of the cosmos. But let's not deter the discussion. How about it, gang? Agree with what Joe has to say? with

NO "SWORD-PEACE"

Gentlemen:

In the letter section of the October *Madge*, John Courtois' and Joe Gibson's comments regarding a space station, orbiting around the Earth, as a possible weapon for peace were interesting. But I am inclined to be pessimistic. My own views regarding a lasting peace may be regarded as archaic, medieval, or at best merely reactionary, but I believe I have perceived certain lessons from history. A secular "sword-peace" has never lasted. The famed Roman Peace

lasted only as long as the Roman legions were able to hold their phalanxes firm; once the Roman crest began to ebb, province after province was either lost or broke away until the pitiful Romulus Augustulus, the last Roman Emperor of the West, knelt weeping before the assembled Germanic chiefs to beg for his life. Does anyone think that any nation, or group of nations, can maintain a purely secular "sword-peace" without the phalanxes being broken at last?

No matter who controls it, an orbital space station as a weapon is still primarily the tool of a "sword-peace".

The only lasting peace the world has ever known has been through the historical faiths of mankind. Islam had it, although still in the process of a renaissance only four decades old, may again achieve it. The Europe-wide faith of Christendom almost achieved it, until, almost at the hour of realization, Europe evolved the poisonous miasma of self-seeking nationalism.

The sword-peace orbital space station, A-bomb, H-bomb, C-bomb strengthened, would be no stronger than the Romans, or the Mongol, British or Chinese. When the first soldier breaks and runs the phalanx is broken.

If you really want your ultimate weapon, read the Gospels over again, or the Qu'ran of Islam, or the writings of the Bahai faith. The secret is in each and all of them: mankind is *one*. A realization of this in the souls of enough people will make war impossible.

If this letter is published, there will probably be a storm of controversy. Religion, I've been told, is old hat, and medieval. However, comment is welcomed.

Edward F. Lacy III
1011 Pabst St.
Houston 17, Texas

Again, the crux of the space station discussion is that we contend there will be more chance for peace if the USA controls it rather than one put up by Russia or UN sponsored which in essence would be handing it to Russia. As for history and religion, look it over a bit more carefully, Ed. You'll find that more wars were fought over religion than any other cause! Ostensibly to achieve that ever-lasting state of peace you mention. Rather a drastic means for so sublime a goal, huh? At any rate, we still believe man has little chance to reach an idyllic state; but he can reduce his squabbles by expanding his horizon. And that of course, fixes our eyes on space. Visibility unlimited! . . . wth

US POOR SLAVES!

Dear Bill:

You are about to be bored with yet another opinion in relation to the hassle over ownership of the first space station.

In your answers to the October issue letters you treat the subject like a silent movie plot. You show the USA as a young and gallant hero whose great strength is always turned toward helping the innocent protect themselves from hideous monsters. Russia, of course, is the major monster. The rest of the world is portrayed as a fair

but feeble-minded damsel.

I agree that politically Russia is a monster. The USA, however, is not fully the grand and glorious hero you make it seem. We have enough trouble keeping ourselves running properly without trying to control the world.

To explain, you say: ". . . we feel the role of the US would be more of a benevolent protector, than a police state." You know, I have a pet parakeet. I am kind to him. I protect him from his natural enemies. I am his *benevolent protector*. Yet, he has no freedom beyond the limits I set. He cannot choose what he eats or where he sleeps. He can do nothing I do not sanction; in fact, he has no say whatsoever whether he lives or dies. I may be his benevolent protector—but he is my slave!

About *Madge* in general: Covers, the best: issue No. 3; the worst, issues 18, 30, and 34. The October cover is very nice—perhaps because I like pretty girls! Stories: lately they've been too plot-worn; get some more original yarns—that is, the ideas behind them.

Jim Sanford
1477 S. Garfield
Denver 10, Colo.

Your parakeet wouldn't know freedom from slavery to begin with, Jim, so the analogy falls short; however, we'll carry it a step further. Substitute a man for the bird in that gilded cage. You take care of him, seeing his wants are satisfied, that he lives contentedly. That's the USA. Put that same "bird" in the hands of the Reds. Wonder if he'd be as happy in a political concentration camp

—up against a firing squad wall—
or perhaps lolling in the frigid
comfort of a "cage" known as Si-
beria? The question is not one of
the USA being virginal pure, but
rather, who offers more today in
a quest for freedom? With a
thing so vital as a space station,
the answer—as far as we're con-
cerned—is pretty obvious! . . .
You want better story ideas?
Watch upcoming issues. For ex-
ample, there's a four-part serial
by George O. Smith which we pre-
dict will rank as one of the top
stf novels in many a year! Oh
yes, we've got some pretty neat
covers for you too! . . . wth

WANTS BEAUTIFUL MEN!

Dear Bill:

I've read *Madge* so long I feel
as if I know you. Just keep im-
proving her as you have been do-
ing and I won't be able to com-
plain! *Madge*, by the way, was
responsible for my husband be-
coming a science fiction fan. He
read a copy a year ago while on
our honeymoon (waiting for me to
get dressed!) and has read every
copy I've purchased since. Now we
have an infant son, who, we feel,
will see the planets, if not the
stars!

I'd like to know if there is some
way I can contact a fan club in
Chicago. We moved here from
Kansas City, and so far I haven't
been able to contact any stf read-
ers.

One word about the covers.
While I have nothing against beau-
tiful girls in interesting situations,
how about a beautiful man or two
once in a while. Just to keep us

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1712 W. Montrose
Chicago 40, Ill.

*Beautiful men, Mary? We didn't
know there was such an animal!*
—Midwest fans, get in touch with
Mary . . . wth

THE LOVE OF HIS LIFE!

Dear Bill:

For the last ten years I've been
an avid reader of science fiction.
About three years ago my interest
waned and I almost ignored it com-
pletely.

But then I met a very charming
young lady at a friend's house.
After a couple of dates I found

her so downright loveable that I've been keeping steady company with her ever since that day.—I've been unhappy with *Madge* at times, but only because I love her so much!

THE LAUGHTER OF TOFFEE in the October issue was nothing less than sheer delight. THE CAUTIOUS INVADERS could have been very good. But the attempt at a surprise ending was too clumsy and thus the story ended rather flatly. I wonder where Sellers figured I'd assume the invaders were if not in an amusement arcade! The other shorts were generally on the poor side. Can't you get some better ones?

Madge's novels are always worth the price of the magazine, so you've got a steady customer. But if you continue to buy these rejects from "Goofy Wonder Stories" one of these days you'll find yourself editing a manuscript of mine. If you have money to throw away,

throw some my way!

Allen R. Miller

142 Clay Ave.

South San Francisco, Cal.

Can't have any bum shorts interfering with this grand romance, Allen, so we'll look into the matter with

STF—AN ADULT SCHOOL

Dear Bill:

Unfortunately I was unable to obtain the July, August, or September issues of *Madge*. I have, however, just purchased the October issue. I only want to make one comment about THE LAUGHTER OF TOFFEE. Frankly, I can't see what it has to do with science fiction. It was one of the funniest things I've read recently, though. Let's see more of Mr. Myers' work on different plots.

Being a teenager, I've naturally given a great deal of thought on what parents think of science fic-

LITTLE LUNCEFORD



"When you can prove what possible interest all this can be to a space cadet, than I'll start taking some interest."

tion. My conclusions are the following: The problem actually reverts back to what parents think of the ability of teenagers to think and judge for themselves. Luckily most parents don't appear too worried over teenagers being corrupted by what they read. Too many people it would seem are inclined to treat young people as if they were complete fools. The logical question is, how can you get a person to "grow up" and assume adult responsibilities if you don't pay some attention to his ideas?

I can't help but agree with Ethel Burke. Her's seems to be the universal complaint among stf fans. The ordinary stf addict seems to think stf consists only of rockets to the moon, flying saucers, or invasion of the Earth by BEMs!

In a more serious vein, now, I noticed several letters on the subject of who should control a space station. My own opinion is that it should not be put in the hands of the UN. Reason is simple: the UN is *not* united. Management should be in the hands of a united people—the USA.

Jack Zeitz
1300 Medary Ave.
Philadelphia 41, Pa.

There's been much talk about various types of reading and delinquency. Our own opinion is that a delinquent is generally not made—he's born. We do not subscribe to the let's - place - the - blame - on - reading school. If we did we'd have to boycott the works of Shakespeare too! . . . See you next month. wkh

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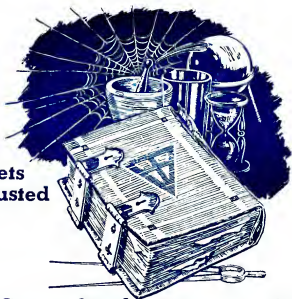
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